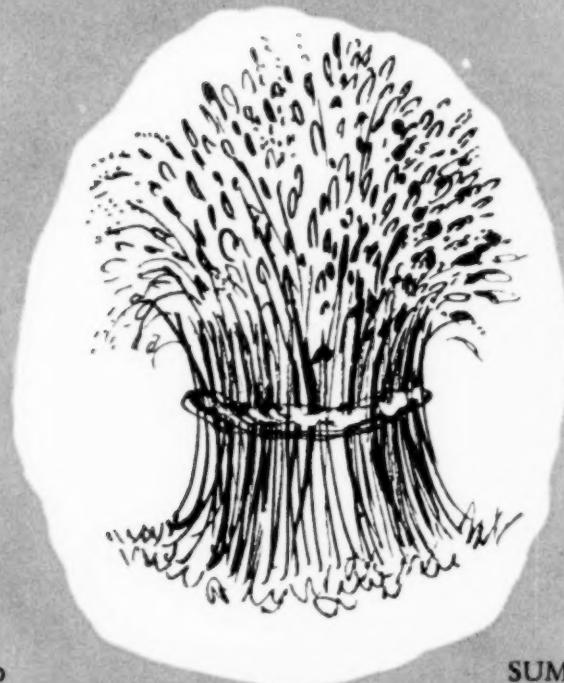


THE CORNHILL



No. 1020

SUMMER 1959

With

**JOHN BETJEMAN
NOEL BLAKISTON
MILFORD COLLINS
VALENTINE LAWFORD
ELSPETH DAVIE
INEZ HOLDEN
PETER HYUN**

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THE CORNHILL



No. 1020

Summer 1959

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JOHN MURRAY, 50 ALBEMARLE STREET, LONDON, W.1

At present the CORNHILL appears quarterly and will publish occasional Supplements containing work of up to 35,000 words in length.

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JOHN MURRAY

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

MILFORD COLLINS is the pseudonym of a schoolmaster and free-lance writer who has published stories, verse and articles on a variety of subjects. He has recently returned to England after a three-year visit to the West Indies.

NOEL BLAKISTON has published two volumes of stories, *Canon James* and *Men of Letters* (Chapman & Hall). He is an Assistant Keeper of the Public Records.

VALENTINE LAWFORD entered the Diplomatic Service in 1934, was successively Assistant Private Secretary to Lord Halifax, Sir Anthony Eden and the late Mr. Ernest Bevin. He attended the Moscow, Quebec and Yalta Conferences, was appointed to the United Kingdom Delegation to the U.N. in 1946 and became Political Counsellor to the Embassy in Tehran in 1949, acting twice as Chargé d'Affaires. He left the Service in 1950 and now lives in the United States. He is writing his autobiography.

JOHN BETJEMAN, poet, broadcaster and author of the successful *Collected Poems*. His recent books are *Selected Poems* and *A Few Late Chrysanthemums* (John Murray), and *Collins' Guide to English Parish Churches* (Collins). His collected essays and broadcasts have been published under the title of *First and Last Loves* (John Murray).

ELSPETH DAVIE studied at Edinburgh University and the College of Art and taught painting for a few years. She lived for some time in Ireland. She has written a number of short stories, one of which was published in *The Observer Prize Stories*, 1952. She is now working on a novel.

PETER HYUN was born in Korea, the son of a Calvinist theologian. He learnt English, Chinese and Japanese as a child and left Korea in 1948 to read literature at Columbia, Madrid and Paris universities. He lives in Paris and is working on a book of his impressions of East and West. *Les Contes*, his collection of fairy tales, will appear soon in France (Delpire). *Voices of the Dawn* forms part of a book to be published in *The Wisdom of the East Series* (John Murray). It has won the official recommendation of U.N.E.S.C.O.

INEZ HOLDEN, novelist, short-story writer and journalist, worked as a reporter on a London daily newspaper and was war correspondent in Berlin and Nuremberg in 1945/46. She was a script-writer to the Rank Organisation and author of the film *Danger Area*. Amongst her books are *To the Boating* (short stories), *Night Shift*, *There's No Story There*, *The Owner* and *The Adults* (John Lane). Another novel is in preparation.



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*With a
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**JOHN
BETJEMAN**



OCTOBER
18s

The late Sir John Squire was for many years the acknowledged leader of London's literary world and author of such familiar anthology pieces as the 'Winter Nightfall', 'To a Bull-dog' and 'The Discovery'. Before his last illness Sir John Squire had been looking forward to the publication of this impressive volume, but unhappily he died while the book was still in the press.

MACMILLAN

Blondin—a Centenary

BY MILFORD COLLINS

ONE hundred years ago, a colourful, excited crowd thronged the banks of Niagara, packing themselves into the stands and straggling out over the suspension bridge. A neat, rather dapper little man appeared from a small hut. He was dressed in the conventional tights of a circus performer and carried a forty-foot balancing pole. Over his shoulder were two straps, cross-wise, with a flat, wide, iron hook to rest on his hips.

The crowd broke into wild cheers, shouting, "Blondin ! Blondin !" The band struck up 'Hail Columbia !' The roar of the Falls added to the feeling of excitement that the sight of the rope gave as it stretched at a dizzy height the 1,100 feet from America to Canada.

Behind Blondin walked his agent, Harry Colcord. As they approached the high cliff of the gorge where the river ran one hundred and seventy feet below, Blondin said,

"Harry, be sure and let yourself rest all the time like a dead weight on my back. If I should sway or stumble, on no account attempt to balance yourself."

Colcord said nothing, but climbed on to Blondin's back, his feet supported by the straps. It is one thing to cross Niagara on a rope relying on your own skill, it is another matter to trust your life to another person, however accomplished he may be.

Little is known of Blondin's thoughts, or fears (if he had any), during his fantastic performances at Niagara, but fortunately Colcord survived what must have been one of the most hair-raising journeys in history, and left an account.

They started out, descending at first because of the slack of the rope, over the pine trees between the cliffs and the river. Then slowly, painfully slowly, it seemed to Colcord, out across the water



COOKING AT CRYSTAL PALACE



LADY IN A BARROW



LIONISING AT LIVERPOOL

Milford Collins

that swirled angrily and distantly below them, making him feel that they were moving rapidly up the river and making little progress to the opposite bank, over a thousand feet away.

Merely to hang like a weighted sack was bad enough, but Blondin had to stop and rest. Seven times Colcord had to descend, feeling with trembling feet for the swinging rope, clutching Blondin's slippery clothing, and knowing that one false move would send them both hurtling to their death.

Near the banks there were guy-ropes twenty feet apart, and here the rope was comparatively steady. But in the centre it was unsupported and Colcord knew real terror when Blondin began to totter as though he was about to fall. For what seemed hours he fought with all his uncanny skill and strength, his pole beating the air in savage waves. Fortunately Colcord remembered his instructions and hung on numbly. Eventually Blondin recovered himself sufficiently to run along the rope so that the increased speed assisted his balance.

He reached the first guy-rope on the other side. Unbelievably it broke and the main rope jerked sideways, forcing Blondin off balance again. Once more he recovered himself and managed to find safety at the next joining of the guy-ropes, where Colcord dismounted.

Soaked with sweat and tense from the experience, Blondin made no comment, not even when it became obvious that the guy-rope had been deliberately cut, most probably by some gambler who was making sure of winning.

Even as they moved up the last incline to the bank they were still in danger. The crowd was pressing forward to welcome them in, some crying with fear and excitement, some offering their hands.

"Look out, Blondin!" said Colcord. "Here comes our danger, those people are likely to rush at us on our landing and crowd us over the bank!"

"What will I do?" Blondin asked.

"Make a rush and drive through them," Colcord replied.

This they did successfully. The journey had lasted forty-five minutes and Colcord records how the cheers rose louder than the roar of the Falls.

Blondin's real name was Jean François Gravelet. He was born

Blondin—a Centenary

on 28th February 1824. At the age of six he was greatly excited when taken to watch an acrobatic performance, and he displayed such abnormal balancing powers in imitating the acrobats that his father eventually sent him to be trained at the École de Gymnase at Lyons.

After years of travelling with a troupe of French gymnasts in France, he was offered an engagement at the Cirque Impérial in Paris. His skill and daring made him the talk of the city and even before he went to America, where he achieved world-wide fame, he had made a lot of money and been awarded decorations and medals.

His meeting with Harry Colcord, who became his agent, took place at Buffalo. On arriving in America Blondin had been an immediate success, but in 1858 he was taken ill and was greatly upset at the way the newspapers and the public were beginning to forget him.

Harry Colcord was also down on his luck. He had been the lessee of the Liverpool theatre until it was burnt down, and he was out of a job. His meeting with Blondin was a stroke of fortune for both of them. As Blondin recovered from his illness they worked out the details of the crossing of Niagara, and by the early spring of 1859 they were both staying at a hotel near the Falls.

Little is known of Harry Colcord. Some writers give his name as Coleman, and *The Times* correspondent who accompanied the Prince of Wales on his American and Canadian tour refers to him as Calcourt. He was also known as 'Masks and Faces', a nickname derived from the title of an entertainment he had produced.

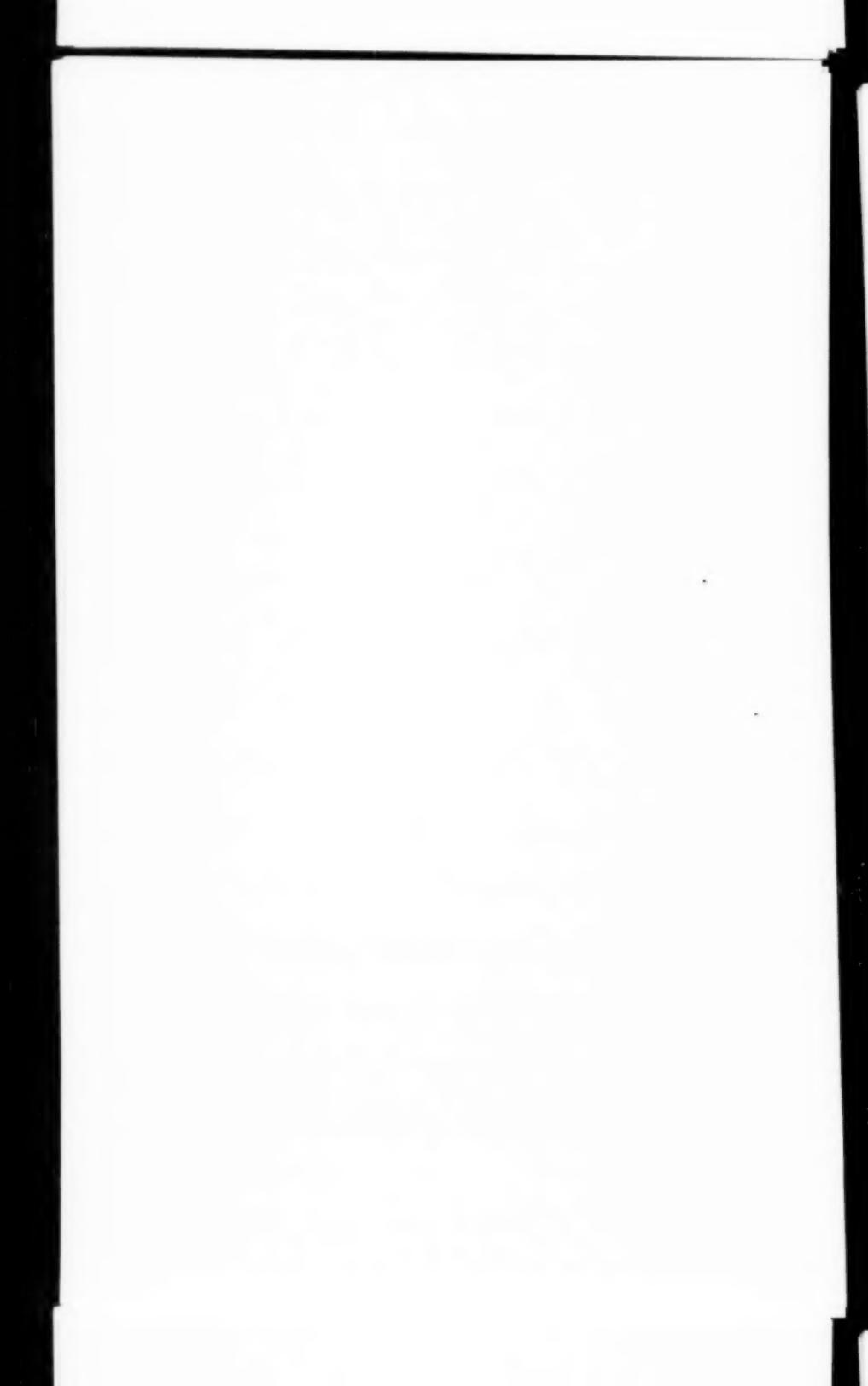
It may seem hardly credible that Colcord should have been prepared to risk his life by being carried by Blondin. But Colcord, like many showmen, had, from early childhood, received training in many different spheres of show business and at one time had done some rope-walking.

Blondin's performances were so perfect that he inspired his audience with complete confidence. In fact he inspired so much confidence that when he came to England, so numerous were the requests to be carried by him across the rope at the Crystal Palace that he made a charge of £5 a time, and was never short of volunteers who were prepared to pay for the privilege.



Gernsheim Collection

BLONDIN CROSSING NIAGARA FALLS ON A TIGHT-ROPE, 1859



Milford Collins

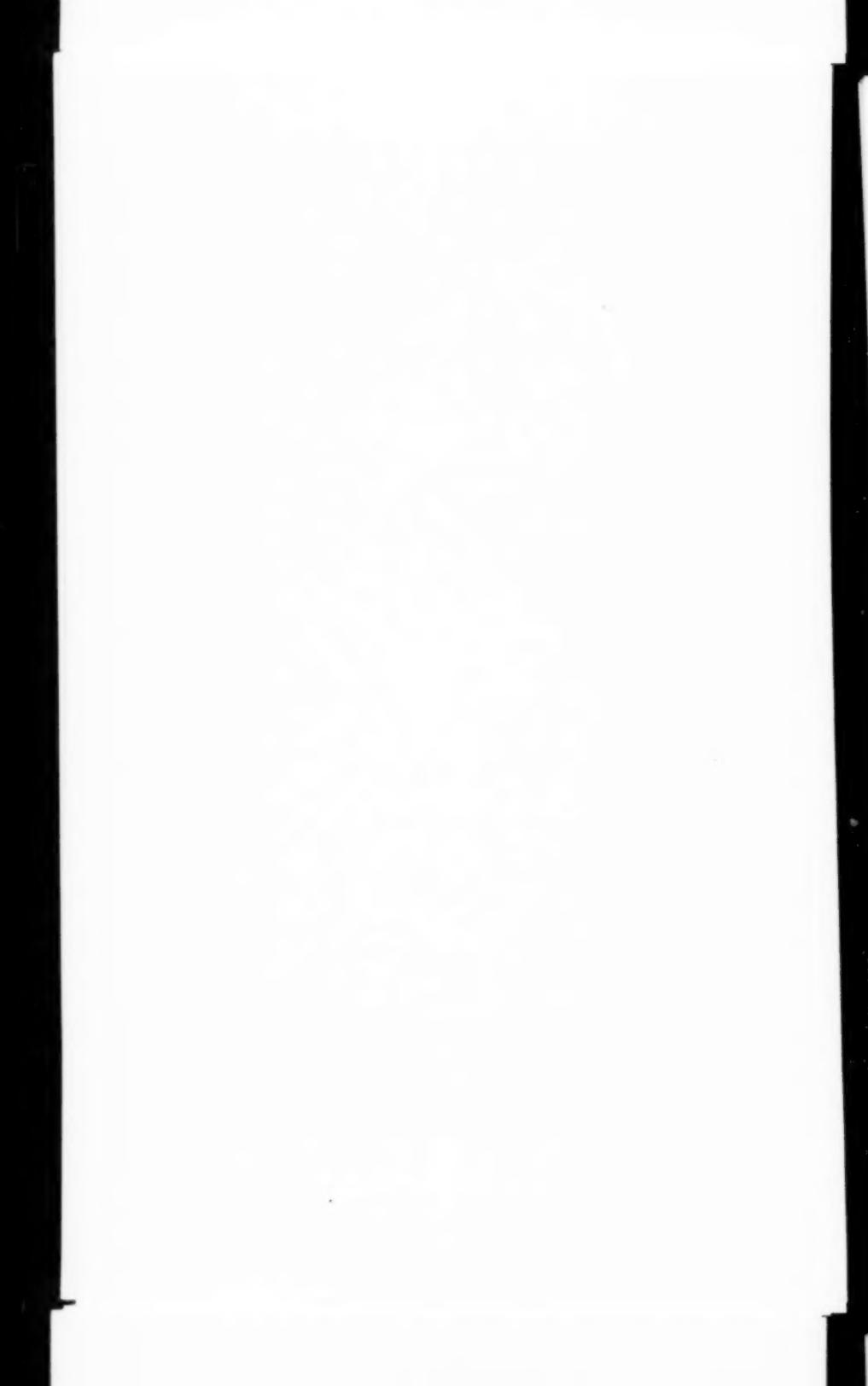
Blondin's first crossing of Niagara was on 30th June 1859, and from then on his showmanship flourished. On 4th July he made the crossing blind-fold, swathed in a sack. By the end of August he was doing it dressed as a slave with his hands and feet shackled. On 2nd September he crossed at night and stood on his head in the middle of the rope, silhouetted against the fireworks.

Somersaults, headstands, walking on stilts, and walking with his feet tied up in baskets became part of his usual routine. Blondin himself seems to have regarded his exhibitions merely as part of his job and rarely seemed unduly worried by his breath-taking exploits. Not so the spectators. William Dean Howell, the American writer, concludes an eye-witness account by remarking, "The man himself looked cool and fresh enough, but I, who was not used to such violent fatigues as he must have undergone in these three transits, was bathed in a cold perspiration, and so weak and worn with making them in sympathy that I could scarcely walk away."

The crowds that swarmed in to Niagara were no easy audience to play to. On one occasion during the wet weather, a spectator described how, when the crowd began to get restless in case Blondin refused to perform, "one elderly gentleman pronounced it an outrage: and for my part, I should cheerfully have assisted to tear M. Blondin to pieces, such was my just indignation at the possibility of disappointment."

Blondin was not put out either by the weather or by his spectators' demands for novelty. In August 1859 he carried a stove on to the rope, lit a fire with the aid of bellows, cooked an omelette and lowered it to the deck of the *Maid of the Mist* as she passed below crowded with passengers.

Public opinion was divided in its reactions. Some journalists could use nothing but superlatives in describing the performances; others castigated him in heavy Victorian prose for appealing to the more unhealthy sentiments of the crowd, who gathered there, so they maintained, only in the hope that Blondin would fall. One correspondent of the *New York Times* even suggested that Blondin was a myth and the stories were all part of a publicity stunt to draw the public to Niagara. This had the effect of bringing more and more people to the Falls to see the wonder for themselves.



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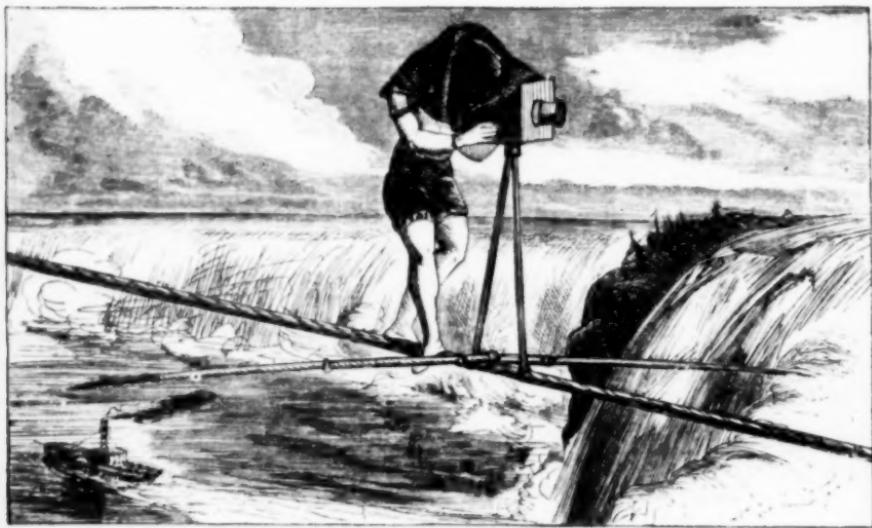
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THE ACROBAT TAKES A 'LIKENESS' OF HIS AUDIENCE



WALKING IN BUSHEL BASKETS AT JONES'S WOOD

Milford Collins

In 1860 he performed before the Prince of Wales who was visiting Niagara as part of his tour. After making the crossing on stilts Blondin approached his distinguished visitor and offered to carry him over on his back. The Prince reluctantly refused but suggested that the Duke of Newcastle, who was in attendance, might care to accept. Unfortunately the Duke also refused.

This offer to well-known visitors became one of Blondin's favourite jokes. Once, however, he got the worst of it. After a series of exhibitions in Paris he invited Cham, the French caricaturist, to cross the Seine with him on a rope.

"Certainly," replied Cham, "I am perfectly willing, on condition that it is I who carry you."

Blondin had not expected this, and when he started to argue, Cham remarked, "You see, it is you, not I, who refuse."

In 1862 Blondin visited London to perform at the Crystal Palace. He gave twelve performances and for each one the Palace was completely packed. At a height of a hundred and eighty feet he repeated all his Niagara feats and added to them by perfecting a somersault on stilts, carrying passengers across the rope, and playing the march from *William Tell* on a violin, pausing every now and then to dance on the rope and turn somersaults.

When his engagement at the Crystal Palace was completed the Governors presented him with a gold medal. He was lionised by London society but he never allowed success to interfere with his rigorous training, and he lived a life more abstemious than that of most first-class athletes.

After leaving England he went to France. In Paris he gave an exhibition of riding a bicycle on the tight-rope. Later he returned to America where he repeated his previous success. There are still people living who saw Blondin perform, but of those who performed with him, the last survivor died in 1958. She was Elisa Mantovani, 'The Queen of the Tight-rope.'

Blondin gave a farewell performance in Belfast in 1896 and then retired to Ealing where he had bought a house. During his retirement he practised daily on a tight-rope that had been erected in his garden. Finally, after fifty years of the most perilous career in the history of public entertainment, he died quietly at home in 1897. His house

Blondin—a Centenary

has long since been demolished, but the road in which it stood is still known as Niagara Avenue.

The line-drawings are reproduced from *Blondin: His life and performances*, edited by Linnæus Banks, 1862.

Autumn Fields

BY NOEL BLAKISTON

"... AND it's no wonder," Philip concluded, " that we can't produce anything like that nowadays. They had faith. What have we got but our decadent death-wish ? "

" Ye-es," said Peter, feeling, as he had often felt during the last fortnight, that he was being stampeded into agreement. Philip had got everything so pat. As an art historian he was no doubt only doing his job in sorting out causes and effects. But is it not possible to be too good at this job ? Time and again Philip had claimed to find order where Peter could only find a muddle, to see black and white where Peter could only see grey. How neatly his ideas slipped into place ! How tidily that phrase, ' our decadent death-wish,' would round off a paragraph in the next book ! And what a confounded number of questions he begged !

Peter finished his cup of wine.

" I don't agree with you at all," he said. " I think you're quite wrong."

There was no answer. Looking round, Peter saw that his companion was lying on his back with his hat over his eyes and appeared to have gone fast asleep. On his other side on the rug, amid the refuse of the picnic, the two wives also were sleeping. He looked again at the view. On the slope opposite, perhaps half a mile away, at about the same level as he was sitting, was the edge of a wood of Spanish chestnuts that stretched along the crest of the hill. Here and there among the golds and browns of the chestnuts were the reds of cherry trees, the colours glowing in the sun. The sides of the valley between him and the wood were covered partly with grass, partly with patches of vine, the leaves of the latter, some of them, almost as red as the cherry leaves. At the bottom of the valley there was a stream. A white cow was reclining there beside a poplar

Autumn Fields

tree. Behind Peter was the road and behind that a railway embankment. There was not a house in sight. In the distance, to the front and to either side, France stretched away, as it so often does, to an unattainably remote horizon.

An old woman, with a sack on her back and a stick in her hand, was walking up the side of the stream. As she approached the cow, the beast heaved itself on to its legs. Suddenly she dropped her sack and made after it waving her stick and shouting. It lurched away. Her shrill imprecations cleft the noon tide hush like the squawking of a jay. She did not come up with the cow and her fury seemed to spend itself as suddenly as it had arisen. Shouldering her sack, she continued her way and was disappearing behind the curve of the hillside when she stopped, turned and discharged some last vituperative shrieks down the valley. The cow watched her out of sight then came back and lay in its former position.

Peter looked among the picnic things. There was still most of the second bottle of wine undrunk. He filled his mug. And there was still a good deal of the *pâté* and garlic sausage left. He cut open a roll of bread, stuffed it and took a mouthful. A pity to leave anything. What does one come to France for? Not only for Romanesque tympanums, thank heaven! 'Decadent death-wish' my foot! The expression had got him on the raw.

The tympanum they had seen that morning had been the cruellest yet, the cruellest only because the largest. A particularly wide doorway had given the sculptors an unusually broad area in which to be horrible. The plan was the normal one. In the centre on a throne sat God the Father, blank and pitiless. On his right were the saved. One gave them a glance, then looked to his left. Here, amid the turgid convolutions of bodies, it was difficult at once to find any plan. Then it could be seen that many of the bodies were being driven by devils, armed with spikes and tridents, into the maw of a dragon. One of the spikes—look—had impaled a sinner through the backside and was sticking out through his stomach. Below him a female was being urged forward with the prong of a trident through each breast. Beside the dragon were two cauldrons into which busy fiends were tumbling the damned, head first. A gleeful imp with bellows was fanning the flames that kept this hell-brew on the boil.

Noel Blakiston

Beyond the cauldrons were various scenes of individual torment. Here was an old bearded man being clubbed on the head, there was a woman held up by her hair and assaulted with tongs and pincers, there was a writhing malefactor to whom no less than four devils were giving their attention. One held his head and one each leg. The fourth had torn open his stomach with the claws of one hand and was drawing out the entrails which dangled over the claws of the other hand as he lifted them to his mouth. A most adroit piece of carving, this last. Other such scenes led the eye at length to the soffit where it focussed itself upon a figure on a much larger scale, facing inwards and curving with the arch, an apostle or saint, with his hands crossed over his breast, who gazed out over the seething butchery with blessed unconcern.

Philip too had seemed unaware of the horror. He had been in raptures as, standing back, he allowed his outstretched arms and fingers to move in sympathy with the rhythms of the sculpture. He said he was much reminded of the illuminations in the Winchester Bible. Never before or since, he said, had there been less of a time-lag in the visual arts between England and the continent.

So we had these ideas in England too? Ugh! Faith? Perhaps. Fear, certainly. Of course they had no death-wish in the age of Dante! They must have been terrified. And it is we who are the decadent ones? What nonsense! Another cup.

"I don't agree at all," Peter said again, aloud.

There was no answer.

The slumber of his companions only aggravated a mood of sententiousness which the wine was bringing on. Surely we have moved forward a bit since detestable Dante? Gone the horror. Also holiness is not now the price of entry into heaven, or not the only price. Being good is all very well, but it is not an occupation. It is not a way of passing the time. It is a brake upon the machine, that has to be applied from time to time, it is not the machine itself. The price of entry into heaven is knowing about heaven. And how little they knew! What impoverishment, for instance, to have been born before modern orchestral music, not to have known Mozart or Beethoven! Practically non-starters, all of them. The later in time the better, obviously. Come—a walk across the valley to that chestnut

Autumn Fields

wood while the stirred mud of the mind is settling. Perhaps, now all are asleep, some shy sylvan genius will share his secrets.

Peter stood up, swaying a little, blinking in the golden sunshine. A goods train was passing. The guard was looking out of the window of the last coach. He had an amusing face and grinned at Peter, who emptied the bottle into his cup and raised the cup in salutation. The guard waved and Peter drank. Now for the walk.

Happy autumn fields ! Now might one cease upon the midday—just slip over into bliss—and as for there being anything disreputable about a death-wish what is it but reverence for the immutable state of things, finding them good instead of bad, and, after many curiosities satisfied and much love, being ready to exchange the good for the better—it's never quite real, the here and now, indeed it isn't, and sometimes positively unreal, *between* something and something, like the 'q' in Colquhoun—and as for it being escapism, which Philip evidently wished to imply, rubbish again, when you're thinking of it as 'into' and not as 'from,' if it isn't positively brave or at least meeting things halfway as they ought to be met ; not, that is to say, with any precise expectations, but just Hope, and of course Charity—Faith is so perplexing and so often at issue with the other two—if, for example, like some carefree sentence that plunges on into the wood with bacchic lurchings till who shall say which is the way out—if, I say, one is ready for the next thing a little ahead of time, what's the harm ?

Walking down the edge of the vines, he stooped and picked up from the ground a black grape that had been left last week by the pickers. It was sugary to the taste, and already half dry like a raisin. He stood still for a moment, dizzy after stooping, while his eyes came back into focus on the sunny landscape. He felt on fire with well-being as the vapours of the wine and the flames of the garlic issued from his lips. The Kingdom of heaven is within you.

Down by the stream were two grey wagtails, flitting, strutting, trotting, scurrying, flitting, settling, poising. He watched them out of sight along the valley, the darlings. He liked watching birds. Philip did not watch birds ; or rather, as he called it, bird-watch, thereby relegating the activity to a special subject. He was a great divider of human enjoyments into subjects. There was first of all

the big division into those subjects that are admissible for a cultured man and those that are not. Then, amongst the former, there was the division into those that one has time for and those one has not time for ; having time, in this context, meaning having time at least to master the essential jargon. Better to keep right off a subject than not to have at least the appearance of being a specialist. Bird-watching was one of the latter subjects. Even in his own subject, art-watching, there were the most rigid subdivisions. How many sunny *châteaux* and dreaming Gothic spires they had sped past, eyes front ! Philip gave the most careful thought to the adjustment of his art-critical blinkers.

There is more kindness in bloody Homer than in Dante ! Whoreson Dante ! A pox on him ! Easeful death. The thing is, being alive at all is a most exceptional state. Far the greatest numbers of people are either dead or not born yet. Is it unhealthy to want to get back to normal ? Hullo, cow. Oh, don't move, please. Look, I am coming no nearer. I mean no harm. I am just cow-watching. Cusha, cusha. *Ne vous dérangez pas*, gentle creature. Oh, please, Madame, don't get up. See, I am going.

Peter jumped the stream and walked up to the trees. The ascent was steep and he was glad to lie down on some dry leaves at the edge of the wood. He shut his eyes. A gentle air was stirring the trees. From time to time bunches of chestnuts would fall with muted thud. Then suddenly, immediately over his head, there was an unexpected noise, a cawing of rooks. Opening his eyes, he saw two or three of them circling above him. An unexpected noise—somehow not a French noise at all. It was an English, indeed an Anglican, noise. Answering the sober dominical call, he shut his eyes again and allowed himself to be transported, in space, some six hundred miles to the north, and more than thirty years backwards in time, to the rectory lawn at Lackby-in-the-fen where he, a boy, was sitting on a wooden bench with Father Tyrrell, listening to the latter discoursing on the subject of Atonement. It was a bright April day. At the top of the high elms and beeches which encircled the garden, the nesting rooks held their clamorous palaver, a noise that was, as a matter of fact, far from sober, dissolving, as it did from time to time, into helpless liquid gurglings. Daffodils were growing in the long grass

Autumn Fields

at the edge of the lawn. If you peeped outwards through the shrubbery you were aware that the rectory, within its circle of trees, was an island in the great bright sea of the fens.

Father Tyrrell was in his early forties. He was fat and dumpy and wore a skull-cap on his bald head. Strong spectacles magnified his bulging eyes. He had the kind of face that seems hardly able to contain its amusement. His podgy hands were clasped over the black silken curve of his stomach. There was good reason for mistaking him—and the mistake he knew was sometimes made—for a Roman Catholic priest. "So near and yet so far," he used to say. As he talked to the boy he took to pieces the word which was his subject. Atonement, at-one-ment, the process of becoming at one again. At length he stopped speaking and they sat a moment listening to the joyous din above them.

"Now, I expect there are some questions you would like to ask," said Father Tyrrell.

Of course there were, thousands of them. Why did there have to be either good or evil? Why did Our Lord never laugh? Why was He not kinder to His mother? But Father Tyrrell had put a bar on questions that began with Why. There was, he said, no answer to such questions.

"What was the point of creating a world that had to be atoned for?"

"You are cheating, Peter. You know perfectly well that that question begins with Why."

Peter thought again. The priest watched him with amused expectation. He enjoyed question time with Peter. It was very rarely indeed that he had a candidate for confirmation from whom he could strike half the number of sparks that flew of their own accord from this inquisitive boy.

"Isn't it possible," said Peter, "just to feel 'at one'?"

"It is possible."

"I think I feel it most of the time."

"You are young. You will learn that that is not the whole story."

"Don't you feel it sometimes?"

"Yes, sometimes."

Peter hesitated.

"Often?" he ventured.

With a crescendo of screeching the rooks sustained their loud arguments, only to collapse in babbling ecstasies.

"Yes," said Father Tyrrell slowly, "even often."

Thank you, Peter nearly said. It seemed to him, he did not quite know why, that Father Tyrrell had conceded much to him. For a while they said nothing.

"Is that all?" said Father Tyrrell at length.

"Yes," said Peter.

"You've let me off lightly today, Peter! Well, should we go across to the church and say a prayer?"

They walked down the drive and out of the gate. There, a little way along the road, was the church with a few houses beside it, and beyond, and all around, was the ocean of ploughland. It was a rest to the ears to move away from the rooks. Not that there was silence out here. The air was alive with sound that seemed to come from nowhere in particular as the song of larks filled the whole firmament with its blissful palpitation. Peter and Father Tyrrell stopped in the middle of the empty road, listening. They were gazing into the distance. It seemed that if you walked for ten or twenty miles you must come to the edge of the world.

"Peter! Peter!"

Philip's voice came across the valley. Peter opened his eyes and saw Philip standing near the car, looking round for him. The wives were packing up the picnic things. Peter got up and waved and started down the slope.

"Hullo!" he called, "Hullo! Coming!"

He felt equal to the afternoon's tympanums. Come on, any number of them!

Foreign Vistas, English Views

BY VALENTINE LAWFORD

Early in 1937, at the age of twenty-six, I was transferred from the Foreign Office to the British Embassy in Paris.¹ It was my first post abroad, and for a while I was grateful for the protection afforded by the relative familiarity of office life within the walls of the Embassy.

The following passages record, as haphazardly as it occurred, a Third Secretary's subsequent exposure to some slightly less familiar aspects of diplomatic life in those times.

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A MONTH to the day after my arrival, the Ambassador and Lady Clerk left Paris.

The scene on the platform of the Gare du Nord a few minutes before the 10.10 a.m. train left for Calais provided the first opportunity I had had to consider the senior members of the staff of the Embassy not as individuals, nor even as married men with their wives, moving in their agreeable and sensible, if narrow and prosaic, world, but as a small, close-knit ethnic group, for a moment thrown into juxtaposition with the world of almost everyone else.

We were to be recognised that morning by the costume which, ridiculous as it might seem to others (and sometimes to us) none the less, year after year, served to remind us that our roots went down at least some way into the past . . . if only into the nearer half of the previous century. Top hats, striped or faintly spongebag trousers, black and white check ties, perhaps not so much in

¹ 'First Embassy' by Valentine Lawford. *Cornhill*, No. 1007.

themselves as in the way they were worn, proclaimed the island nationality of their wearers. Even the less outspokenly national costume of our womenfolk presented an example of that essentially Anglo-Saxon thing, a compromise : in this particular case between the ephemeral Paris spring fashions of nineteen thirty-seven and the perennial good taste of Harvey Nichols. It is true that there was a small French element in our midst. But Sir George's kindred spirits from the Jockey Club could be relied upon (sartorially) not to let England down, and the representatives of the Quai d'Orsay had done their best to honour a retiring Head of Mission who was so notoriously *correcte*. And Monsieur André Blumel, the Private Secretary to the Président du Conseil, though he was clearly not one of us, was short enough in the leg to be hidden from view by the more elongated figures around him.

On the few square feet outside the reserved compartment into which Lady Clerk had now retreated, encumbered by a bouquet of roses from the Chef de Protocole, some passing whim of History had temporarily planted the standard of the English upper middle class. If it had not been for the age of the Ambassadorial couple, and their unenthusiastic faces (he because he was so loth to go, she because she could hardly wait for the end of this last, supremely enervating ceremonial) there would have been much to suggest a wedding. The women of our group, seen *en masse*, conveyed an impression of almost uniformly blonde good looks. The men, though they comprised a wider variety of physical types, were the familiar contingent of cousins and regimental comrades, young, middle-aged and old, shifting from the left foot to the right, smiling mildly at a family joke, shifting to the left foot again. Even without the assistance of champagne, there was no denying that in contrast to the dimness of everyone else on the platform, business men of uncertain origin, whispering nuns, or prospective 'French maids' with their ancestral, wicker-work luggage, we emitted a modest radiance. Indeed, in the last analysis, it was thanks to the light we shed that one could still see the figure of the Ambassador at all, as the poor man, his formal clothing already packed away, his great moment over, balanced himself on the edge of our glowing world before he toppled for ever out of sight.

Yet for some reason which I could not at the time have attempted to define we all paled beside one female figure on the fringe of our group—the first blue-haired woman I had ever seen, whom there was little difficulty in recognising from her legend as Lady Mendl. Here was the surprise guest, the improbable relation who was also, rather annoyingly, a notoriety. One hadn't perhaps expected her to come ; but come she had, dressed more quietly (blue hair or not) than anyone, even the exceptionally un-Air Force wife of the Assistant Air Attaché.

Quietly dressed may be ; but her face, clothes and manner were set in such a different key from those of her companions that I could have sworn she must have dropped in by parachute or from a private helicopter, which had brought her, no doubt at vast inconvenience and very great expense, out of an utterly alien world. To that world she would shortly return, not as it happened by air, but in a box-like Rolls-Royce, with a miniature Schnauzer to share the rug, and who knows what assignation with a hair-dresser or a florist or a dietitian at the far end of the journey, to put things back into their normal perspective. Not that Lady Mendl, I suspected from the start, did not see the point of Embassies. True it was a *corvée*, this seeing off of Ambassadressses at such an early hour in the morning ; and it had disrupted her usual day. But she must be far above and beyond being put out by *corvées*. And the paraphernalia of the British Embassy connexion, so long as it was treated as the frame and not the picture of life itself, had a certain rococo charm which she of all people should know how to appreciate. She was outstanding enough in her own right. But in the setting which her surprising marriage to the Special Counsellor provided, her comings and goings, in comparison with those of the other smart American women in Paris, assumed an added interest and distinction ; as though she alone of her kind possessed the key to an ancient, overgrown enclosure which in their hearts they would have dearly liked to visit, however prone they might be in public to under-rate its charms or advantages compared with those of the more manicured but less exclusive landscapes to which they had free access.

When the train had serpentine away into the sunlight, Lady Mendl, to whom I had by now been introduced, took my arm ; and we

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began to walk slowly, and at some distance behind the rest of the group, towards the waiting Embassy cars, which in those days of privilege were parked halfway down the platform. There was a feeling of levity in the air, the sort of carefree expectancy that characterises the early moments of any interregnum ; and when my new acquaintance, in a manner half flattering and half dictatorial, invited me to luncheon at Versailles at the week-end, I gaily accepted, without so much as a thought that next Sunday I might be on duty in the Chancery. On the contrary, I was almost able to persuade myself that it was precisely in order to attend *Fêtes Galantes* at the Villa Trianon that the Foreign Office had sent me to Paris in the first place —so potent was the suggestion that emanated from my remarkable companion that for people as reasonably charming as ourselves, there was no need to be afraid of leading a full life in two periods at once : the thirties of the present century as she undoubtedly knew them, and the middle years of the eighteenth century, for which she acted as the accredited agent.

Almost able to persuade myself, but not quite. No longer standing before the first-class section of the boat-train with my back to actuality, I now had to face it, growing more conscious at each step of the impression that we ourselves were about to make on the rest of the contemporary world.

It happened that it was barely two weeks since bloody rioting had occurred at Clichy. A group of Communist-inspired demonstrators had invaded a cinema in which a film was for some reason being shown to an audience of families belonging to the anti-Communist *Parti Social Français* ; and no less a person than Monsieur Blumel had been slightly wounded in the head when he arrived on behalf of Monsieur Blum to find out what it was all about. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the occasion, the fact was that since the police had fired and inflicted casualties on the invaders a section of the French urban working class (understandably sensitive to any loss of *le sang ouvrier*, however generous they might claim to be with the blood of tyrants) had not needed much outside encouragement to see red. So much so that for a while the tricolour threatened to sink to the status of the oriflamme ; and in its place, whether from opportunism and cussedness, or from an instinctive belief in the ineluctable

process of history, quite a number of French men and women were to all appearances undisturbed to find, when they looked up at some of their public buildings, and at the unfinished pavilions of the Exhibition that was designed to draw the middle classes of the world, the flag of Moscow flapping suggestively in the Paris breeze.

I had been doing my best to exploit the local colour of the political scene in the draft telegrams to the Foreign Office on the French internal situation which it was now my business to submit to the critical eye of Michael Wright. Here was something to write home about, a splash of scarlet to enliven the pages of drab typescript and, as one hoped, the monotonous day of a colleague or two in Whitehall. But once I stepped outside the gate of the Embassy it was harder to remain artistically aloof ; and English as I knew myself to be, I became perforce an embattled French bourgeois like the rest. So that on the morning which I now recall I was even more susceptible than I should otherwise have been to what I supposed must be the opinions of the assortment of people who hung about on the path that lay between us and the security of our cars. Moving, oh so slowly, towards a group of blue-overalled porters, with a blue-haired Lady Mendl on my arm, how could I fail to notice that their eyes and mouths, which had already assumed expressions of contempt at the sight of the procession of *fainéants* just ahead of us, let themselves go, at our approach, in an outburst of unbridled derision ? My companion, whose white-gloved hands firmly clasped my arm, was gazing superbly into space from under the narrow brim of her sailor-hat. It was not possible to guess what thoughts passed through her mind. But something told me that in that earlier century of her choice this tough old woman with the figure of a girl and the opaque eyes of a La Tour pastel might not have been such a bad companion for a young man on his way to the guillotine.

She had a voice, to me both novel and agreeable, which I assumed was 'old Brooklyn' or 'old New York'—not at all in the sense of 'little old' or 'dear old' but rather as one might say 'Vieux-Paris' or 'Alt-Wien.' Pronunciations, like words themselves, which have once denoted the highest degree of respectability, become in time, notoriously, the hall-mark of those who are not generally regarded as respectable at all. Even so I was surprised at first to hear, or to

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think I heard, Lady Mendl say 'Thoisday' for 'Thursday.' On listening more closely, however, I became aware that what she actually said was 'Theuisd'ay'; and that, whether or not the habit had originally been unconscious, she now played with certain vowel-sounds deliberately, for on each occasion when she did so in my presence her eye, rather balefully, sought out mine. Naturally anxious to make a decent impression on one who was so famous and who yet from the start had treated me as a friend of long standing, I did my best to convey, by the solemnity with which I looked back, that I fully understood that her New Amsterdam origin was every whit as splendid as the origin (or what we allowed to be assumed was the origin) of the rest of us.

When I had finally seen her into her car she smiled a quizzical kind of farewell and, setting her lips in a comic, horizontal line of concentration (like a little girl deciding on the next chocolate) did not look my way again as the *landaulette* slid out of the station. That must be the American career-woman's goodbye, I thought to myself. As neat as the sound (how well I have come to know it since!) of a hand replacing the receiver at the other end of the telephone wire when one is still ineffectively taking one's leave.

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On the following Saturday, accepting an invitation which I hoped might give me a chance to escape for a change from the *Front Populaire* version of France, I drove out of the city with Agatha Perowne to spend the day hunting the stag (like Louis-Quinze and Louis-Seize and Napoleon) in the Forest of Rambouillet.

The nominal mastership of the *Equipe de Bonelles*, the modern representative of the pack of staghounds which Madame de Pompadour had heard in full cry beyond the windows of Saint-Hubert as she sat indoors reading the *Contes* of Voltaire, had passed, a few years before our visit, on the death of the astonishingly athletic, octogenarian Duchesse d'Uzès, to her daughter, the Duchesse Douairière de Luynes. The Duchesse de Luynes was a jovial, dumpy lady of whom it might have been said at that period of her life that only another Duchess would have taken her for a Duchess at all. She was, however, sufficient of a Duchess to be able to afford not to pretend

that she was fond of riding. "If I had had my choice," she remarked to Agatha at the rendezvous, "I doubt whether I should ever in my life have placed my *derrière* on the back of a horse." Since presumably she was now of an age to choose, her *derrière*, wrapped in a dust-coloured carriage-rug, rested that day securely on the wide seat of a dog-cart, as she drove away at a spanking trot along the paths through the forest, like good Queen Anne under the oaks at Windsor, a plumed *tricorne* firmly tilted over her honest soldier's nose. She was fortunate in having, in the husband of her sister-in-law the Duchesse de Noailles, the perfect substitute. Not only was the Duc de Noailles a fine horseman, by all accounts incomparably better versed in the art of venery than most English Masters of Hounds, but his patience and politeness might have served as an example to more than one of his colleagues across the Channel.

We were so kindly received, as foreigners, that it seems ungracious to admit that twentieth-century stag-hunting in the Ile-de-France, for all the melancholy beauty of the great woods, the blue and scarlet and gold of the caps and habits, the antique, nostalgic *sonneries* of the scattered horns, with their cadences as familiar as the rise and fall of a nursery rhyme, struck one outsider as rather too solemn and scientific a sport. As the stag never broke cover that day, neither did we. Sometimes what I took (probably mistakenly) to be our quarry, followed by a bewildered beauty or two from his harem or a couple of bedraggled hounds, would float airily across the ride, a hundred yards from where we stood waiting; but for the most part I had to content myself, for hours on end, with the barest reminder—an isolated yelp, a blasphemy in the rich voice of Jolibois the huntsman, a ducal grunt of encouragement—that some way off, invisible among the trees and undergrowth that spread around us for miles on every side, a number of men and hounds were enacting the mysteries of the chase. From time to time a mild electric shock would seem to animate the group of men and women among whom I found myself; and following their example with a knowing expression (though a little self-consciously, as when, in the place of worship of an unfamiliar faith, one attempts to stand up or sit down in time with the adepts around one) I would let my horse canter towards the end of the ride. Once or twice that afternoon we actually ran far enough, to the

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heartening accompaniment of the '*bien allé*,' blown by a dashing young Protestant banker who knew what was happening and had a horn to prove it, to reach one or another of the cross-roads, or *étoiles*, from which yet more identical rides radiated into the surrounding forest. "*Hêtre du Ramoneur*," "*Croix de Vilpert*," my companions would shout at me informatively over their shoulders, as we scattered to right and left the groups of rat-faced keepers in velveteens and children in bérets from some Catholic *patronage* who act as camp-followers on a day's hunting in France as loyally as the retired Rear-Admirals and 'young entry' from the Pony Club fulfil the same function at home.

But there was no question of a run for the sake of a run, *à l'anglaise*; and the afternoon began to seem long as one after another my companions, hearing that I was a Secretary in the British Embassy, manœuvred their mounts into a position where they could conveniently assure me of their lifelong friendship for perfidious Albion, some of them adding, however: "But why do you English like this awful fellow Blum?" I did my best with the stock reply that His Majesty's Government were less concerned with who was at the head of the French Government than with whether whoever it might be was willing to co-operate with us in matters of common interest, which in our opinion Monsieur Blum certainly was. They looked puzzled, and asked me instead what I thought of French hunting: a question which was even more difficult to answer convincingly.

At last, towards sunset, our stag cast himself in despair into one of the chain of huge lakes which Louis XIV had caused to be dug, through farmlands, villages, swamps and forest, indiscriminately, to fill the reservoir which supplies the basins and fountains of Versailles. Several hounds made a brave effort to follow him into the deep water; but he was at length despatched by a *piqueur*, who was rowed out by a keeper in a little boat and shot him at close range. In a short ceremony on the twilit shore, to the music of the assembled horns playing '*les honneurs du pied*', the Duc de Noailles (the Duchesse de Luynes having by that time sensibly gone home) presented Agatha with one of the stag's wet feet.

I have not described that day with the intention of pouring

retrospective scorn on bloodsports. I can scarcely indulge in any such self-righteousness, for while no argument in support of hunting, fishing, or shooting has ever convinced me of their innocence, no argument has ever deterred me from rising early to follow a pack of hounds or staying up late to catch sand-eels by the light of the moon. Nor, I know, is it moral scruple that prevents me firing at the stags I have sometimes stalked all day on a hill, so much as the knowledge that I am an exceptionally bad shot. It was merely that in the forest of Rambouillet as always elsewhere the excitement of pursuit (somewhat diluted on this particular day by more than the usual hours of waiting) was followed by shame and a sense of futility at the moment of capture and killing.

Still less was it my intention to ridicule those who had been kind enough to invite me to hunt with them. They were a surprising collection. At least they might have surprised anyone doctrinaire enough to suppose that a group of French citizens in the nineteen-thirties dressed up for a day on horseback in the costume of the *Régence* would necessarily turn out to be uniform representatives of an effete upper class, interested exclusively in their own luxurious lives and ignorant of everything that in the period passed for reality, except in so far as it might have been distorted for them in the columns of the *Action Française*. True, many of those who had spoken to me that afternoon shared a distaste for the Government of the *Front Populaire*. But in a democracy it was surely not a sign of lack of public spirit, let alone effeteness, on the contrary it was almost a duty to hold views for or against the government of the day.

Nor above all should it be thought that their opposition to the then Prime Minister of France was motivated by anti-Semitism; for the simple fact was that many of those who spoke to me were themselves Jewish. A number of these, almost alarmingly conscientious, liberal-minded men and women, blessed with riches but open-handed and self-oblivious in their daily lives to a degree for which my memory could find no parallel elsewhere, had been my friends since long before my arrival at the Embassy; and it was in fact to them that I owed my invitation in the first place. With my mind, however unwillingly, still resounding with the word 'Fascist,' which the par-

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tisans of the Extreme Left and their gifted spokesmen had as good as succeeded, by dint of constant repetition, in attaching to all those who did not happen to agree with them, I was at first a little confused to discover that certain of these Jewish friends, and precisely those whom I knew and loved best, were enthusiastic supporters of Colonel de La Rocque and his Parti Social Français, the former ex-servicemen's association known as the Croix de Feu. As time went on I was to read some of their literature and to watch them at their manifestations. I found their leader sadly un-gifted and entirely un-magnetic; but there seemed no reason to doubt the respectable French patriotism of the mass of his supporters. Certainly their anxiety over the state of French economy and the decline of French prestige abroad were just as unimpeachable witness of the sound logic traditionally associated with the name of France as the touching faith demonstrated by the followers of Monsieur Blum that paid holidays and the forty-hour week, perfectly estimable social reforms in themselves, personified the twentieth-century glory of France and would somehow pull her through, come what may. If one were to fix the label 'Fascist' on people such as these, one would also have to fix it on the vast majority of my compatriots, together with a fair proportion of the adult population of Sweden, Holland and Belgium. But perhaps one would do better to refrain from fixing labels at all—if one did not want History one day to make one look silly.

Back in Paris, with no word yet from the future Ambassador as to whether he wanted a resident Third Secretary in his house or would prefer me to look for an apartment of my own, I accepted an invitation from the Perownes to spend a few weeks with them in the Rue de Varenne. Unwittingly I had timed my departure from the Crillon to coincide exactly with the arrival of the future Queen of the Netherlands and her German Consort, then on their honeymoon; and it proved impossible for a while to interest any one of the servants in the hotel in my luggage. As I awaited their convenience outside the door in the Place de la Concorde I reflected with a certain self-satisfied *Distanz* that not so very long ago, and less than a couple of hundred yards from where I was standing, the Paris crowd had twice gathered with every sign of enthusiastic approval, to witness the execution first of a King and then of a Queen of their own. Whatever may have

been the eighteenth-century meaning of 'Republican,' it was difficult to say just what it meant today.

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Victor Perowne, always partial to large houses (there was something pleasingly Beckfordian in his æsthetic tastes) had rented an immense modern *hôtel* belonging to the proprietress of the Magasins du Louvre. With it went several of the owner's fine tapestries and some rather less impressive examples of contemporary French frosted glass. But the great rooms were empty enough, even after Victor had imported the contents of his four storeys in Rutland Gate, to house the giant canvases, with their square yards of sun-baked Sicilian landscape or square feet of ivory seventeenth-century flesh, which it was his delight to acquire, rather naturally 'for a song,' on his expeditions to the *Foire aux Puces*.

On returning there from the Chancery for luncheon one day, I found Marc Hambourg seated at the piano, practising for the recital which he was to give in the evening at the Salle Gaveau. He was a genial and sympathetic artist; but from exuberance either on his own part or on the part of the loud pedal of Victor's instrument, the most innocuous of Glück's Minuets echoed that day like an African war-dance in the gaunt, neo-Renaissance saloon. As soon as I decently could, I made my way into the little formal garden where, once I had closed the windows behind me, I could listen in peace to the rival performance of a blackbird, singing to his wife above the half-open tulips. Nor was that the garden's only appeal. Through a gap in the chestnuts at the far right-hand corner I had long since discovered that there was an almost indecently intimate view into the neighbouring property of the Soviet Embassy. At any hour one's eye was drawn towards that gap as irresistibly as it had ever been towards a lighted key-hole or a letter left open on someone else's desk. A little ashamed of myself, and not exactly in anticipation of pleasure (for everyone knows that peepers and readers of other people's letters rarely learn anything to their advantage) I yielded that afternoon yet again to the peculiar temptation.

I might have been contemplating a shady corner of almost anybody's garden. Two little girls in overalls drew lines with sticks in the sand

of a path ; and a slightly older boy in a grey cloth cap rode his bicycle round and round the flower-beds and lawns, the sound of his bell, each time he passed the girls, breaking the leafy silence of *rus in urbe*. One of the children called to an amiable sheepdog standing near by, whose name was Sultan. If only it could always have been afternoon !

For I knew that when night fell, skilfully placed lights would flood the garden-front of the house and a posse of night-watchmen, attended by some of Sultan's less amiable relatives, would pad back and forth along the frontiers of this playground. Convinced of the purity of our own intentions, and assuming an equal innocence on the part of the Duchesse de Vendôme (*née* Princess Henriette of Belgium) and the other exceptionally respectable inhabitants of our corner of the Faubourg Saint-Germain, I wondered whether the lights, the watchmen and the sheepdogs, if they served more than a ritual purpose, were conceivably intended to control the nocturnal movements of Mr. Yakov Suritz, the Soviet Ambassador, and the lugubrious-looking tribe of chauffeurs, strong-men and clerks who shared his lovely, early eighteenth-century residence. Whichever way you looked at it, it was equally distressing.

Infinite in number and variety, the impressions of those years lie one upon another in the mind, like forgotten wall-papers in an old and frequently redecorated room. Many of them have been too long stuck together to be pulled apart now ; but here at least is one spot where the upper surfaces can be scraped away sufficiently to reveal, in something like its original freshness, a fragment of one of the patterns far below. It is not difficult to recognise part of a *Toile de Jouy* : the figure of a young man snooping through a *vignette* of leaves and branches at the prospect of a house and garden which they frame. Charming enough, if somewhat conventional. But as one learns as a child, there is an art in looking at wall-papers ; and with a little effort, even in middle age, I can still think my way into this one.

For all its air of afternoon calm, an ill wind blows towards me out of that neighbouring garden. It is not merely that among the strangers who own it, if they should ever consent to know us, Victor, for example, would be written off as a superfluous dilettante and I myself as a useless little escapist. Nor just that, in their eyes, escapist like dilettantes belong irredeemably to the criminal classes and are only fit

for the mines. *Mon mal vient de plus loin . . .* Serious-minded or frivolous, hostile or eager to please, though it is conceivable that for some reason of which we know nothing, someone from our side of the hedge may one day, for a moment, be given the run of the garden and even be allowed into the house, there is no possibility of his being permanently or genuinely acceptable there ; for not just our criminal selves but the whole world which has produced us has already, and how deservedly, ceased to exist. And why should anyone make a habit of inviting a ghost ?

So insistent was the message from the garden, this latest, most horrifying version of the doctrine of original sin, that sometimes, returning to the Embassy after my snooping, and preparing once again to plunge, with a sense of guilty relief, into the rest of the day's work, I still could not immediately banish from my mind the nightmare vision of myself as one of a whole doomed generation of ostriches, resolutely burying our heads in the sand.

But like all such visions, it would ultimately fade.

★ ★ ★ ★

As the days passed and life in the Chancery continued its ever more familiar course I came, in spite of myself, to think that I was beginning to grasp the meaning of the strange painting on the wall of one of the Under-Secretaries' rooms in the Foreign Office, which had once seemed so inexplicably perverse : a *nature morte* of quills, paper, inkpot, sealing-wax and red tape, with the bold legend, *Haec Mea Voluptas !* Perhaps there was, after all, a kind of sensual pleasure to be derived from the bureaucratic life. The mastery of any art, even the minor art of drafting telegrams, interviewing strangers, cooing to one's foreign colleagues on the telephone and knowing automatically what was the acceptable thing to say at an interdepartmental meeting, had a satisfaction of its own. But that was hardly Voluptas. Far beyond the smug enjoyment of one's modest proficiency I sensed the presence of something less respectable, perhaps, but infinitely more profound ; the surrender of one's self to routine problems and endless, regular working hours, so that they gradually built up a lasting defence against the infinitely more disturbing problems lurking outside the office walls, and ultimately held out

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a promise, to the confirmed addict, of the perfect alibi for life itself.

Not that I myself was as yet on the way to self-abandon. Admittedly, sitting at my desk, I was pleasantly aware of the security afforded by my rampart of telephones, trays and files. But precisely because I knew it was there I dared to cast frequent, nostalgic glances at the shining slate roofs and violet-blue sky over the street. If in the Third Room, with its northerly exposure, there was little to suggest a change of season, across the landing in the Registry the sun curled up the corners of forgotten copies of *The Times* and for longer and longer each day strove to pierce the billowy smoke-screen that rose from the metal ashtray between Mr. Moignard the Accountant and Mr. Mullard the Courier, as they sat like a pair of matching gargoyles, decyphering telegrams in front of the window. Even in the Embassy one was glad to know that outside it was April and would soon be May.

★ ★ ★ ★

When the time finally came for my first Sunday luncheon with Lady Mendl, Armine Dew let down the discoloured top of his khaki convertible Chrysler (a bargain picked up some years back at the United States Embassy, where it had long since acquired the status of a diplomatic heirloom), polished up the wings of the Viking's helmet on the radiator and drove me jerkily through the groves of Marnes and Vaucresson to Versailles. A quarter of a mile down the Boulevard Saint-Antoine he drew up before a sheet of black-painted metal in a stone wall and bravely sounded his horn. It was an instrument of the Klaxon type, once fashionable enough, but emitting at this date an unusual bleating sound, in keeping with the decidedly 'out-of-town' appearance of our conveyance. This was not quite the way I had pictured my first arrival at the Villa Trianon, I was thinking, as the *gardien* (a child's drawing of a Frenchman, a little dog's face grinning sweetly above a high, starched collar and narrow bow-tie) opened the gate with a clang. But nor was it, perhaps, a very remarkable house, considering all that I had been told about it: an oblong box, white with a slate roof, the lines curiously hard and straight for France, set back a little to one side at the end of a brief tunnl of

clipped hornbeams. Slowly as on a seashore the old car moved through deep shingle towards the door.

A group of prosperous-looking chauffeurs eyed us severely; and I gladly accepted Armine's suggestion that I should go in ahead of him while he parked his car alone.

Indoors, the house seemed overpoweringly perfumed; as though in a dream one had stepped straight from the ozone and pebbles of the Channel beach into a mysterious pavilion, half temple and half bathroom. The hall was small, full of Madonna lilies and the mellow wood of unpainted eighteenth-century furniture.

A couple of thin, nervous women in dark blue were gesticulating, with staccato movements to which I was not accustomed, in the embrasure of the door which led into the room beyond. Two pairs of highly articulate feet, in dark blue leather shoes, almost like school slippers but of an immaculate neatness, were planted in wilfully ungraceful poses on the parquet floor. As the figures gesticulated, a dozen little objects on their wrists, gold, platinum and precious stones, rattled and tinkled and jarred one against the other in time with their voices, as they raised or waved or dropped their arms to emphasise whatever it was they were saying. Their voices were as strident as the sound of their bells and baubles; but in the confusion of signing my name as casually as I could in the visitors' book and examining in a flash the names of those who had preceded me (a homely English layer I made, momentarily at the bottom of a monstrous, international club sandwich) I caught little of what they actually said, except the constant repetition of the word 'darling.' Surprisingly it did not seem to convey any suggestion of endearment or intimacy, but rather a feeling of acute harassment, almost of physical pain. 'But-darling . . .' and then again 'Darling-no . . .'

When I approached them, my writing and reading done, and excused myself for asking to pass through the door, they continued talking but moved kindly enough to one side. Then I heard that they were talking about time. Not complaining of how soon, alas, it passes; nor quoting someone eminent to prove that it does not exist; but about the way they had divided it up lately: with journeys, planes, trains, maids and luggage, time-tables, bookings, fittings, dates and more planes. "Then on the Tuesday after, or no, it must have

been on the same day, the Monday ; or I'm not sure, it might have been the Tuesday . . ." one of them was saying. All these subtle distinctions between one piece of time and another had told on her face, particularly around the mouth. No amount of massage or make-up could disguise the fact that it had a used look at the corners ; and even when she was not speaking it moved noticeably, as though she were still making mental computations in minutes and hours and days and months : playing with the bit, like a horse calculating the number of paces before taking off for the next jump. To be frank, both women looked exhausted, but only from the neck up. They were evidently strong enough in the legs never to have to sit down.

Not so my hostess. At the far end of a narrow gallery with gold and sepia frescoes along one wall, I caught sight of Lady Mendl on a *banquette*, arm-in-arm with a beautifully dressed, middle-aged man. In her case, as I had noticed at the Gare du Nord, concentration gave her a look both comic and child-like. She leaned forwards, and downwards, side by side with her companion, to whom she was talking in a low voice, accentuating her remarks with frequent pats of her gloved hand on the sleeve of his coat. There was no-one else in the gallery. Most of the guests seemed to be out of doors, or halfway there in a glassed-in terrace ; or so I guessed from the rattle of bracelets on my right. I wondered whether she would recognise the new Secretary who had been presented to her at the railway-station ; but she did not glance in my direction and I had an instant to study her *mise-en-scène*. There was a noticeable absence of bright colour ; instead, a general suggestion of oyster-white and pale brown, gold flaking off old mouldings, a marble fireplace surmounted by a marble bust, low, ivory velvet seats along the wall, little armchairs of zebra and leopard skin, vases of the ubiquitous *lilium candidum*, crystal chandeliers ; and outside, reflected in a vast mirror through a portico beyond the windows, a garden wholly green.

She looked up at last, welcomed me with a smile and made me sit down beside her, gripping me with her free hand around the small of the arm. "Now this is very interesting and you should hear this," she said protectively, taking it for granted that I knew the man on her other side and continuing the conversation. I felt

flattered, but just after I sat down the butler offered me a drink and by the time I had applied myself to it the story, whatever it was, had been told. Like everything else in this house, I thought, the cocktail is perfumed. Not at all unpleasantly, but as though, instead of drinking, one had been moving, in perfect comfort, through a mist impregnated with Cointreau. But I was not to be allowed to drift for long. "Come," said my hostess, raising herself with the help of her two supporters, "there is a perfectly lovely girl I want you to meet: Miss Netcher. Miss Netcher is Rosie Dolly's niece. You must look after Rosie Dolly's niece. Where is Miss Dolly's niece? Where is Miss Dolly's niece?"

For a moment I had a suspicion that this was another of those traps, the irreparable introductions by someone's aunt to a scornful, or otherwise incompatible wall-flower at the far end of the ball-room, which had turned the dances of my youth into whole lifetimes of unhappy marriage. But I fussed and flattered myself unduly. Miss Dolly's niece was a husky, cheerful-looking girl, rather highly coloured, with a row of facsimile hyacinths quivering in her scuttle-shaped, blue hat (chosen, I guessed, by Aunt Rosie, to whose healthy mind youth naturally suggested spring). Hyacinths, but no wall-flowers, for Miss Netcher. After a few minutes of easy conversation (how strange Americans are, I thought, they all seem to have met one before) Miss Dolly's niece, the bouncing, transatlantic Proserpine, smiled generously, told me that it had indeed been a pleasure, and vanished from sight; in search of more spring flowers, perhaps, or more probably simply to talk to someone whom she knew even better than she knew me.

But I was not to be lonely. My hostess, showing no signs of displeasure at the failure of her little scheme, smiled encouragingly at me from a distance, and sent one of her two trusted American lieutenants to see that I came to no harm: a well-groomed, but somehow unconvincing-looking man, who introduced himself to me as Johnnie McMullin. He appeared to be some kind of a resident social arbiter; and I knew instinctively that if he couldn't abide Armine's inimitably insular brand of Englishness, he disapproved even more wholeheartedly of his early American car.

On this first occasion, he said, he hoped that I would sit with him

at luncheon ; and he even went so far as to commend my scarlet woollen socks and brown buckskin shoes. On my other side, an exceptionally pretty woman, to whom at her request I had brought a meagre helping of raw celery and grated carrots, rewarded me with a casual, but apparently quite serious, invitation to spend a week-end at her house at Le Touquet. When I enquired naïvely what one did at the seaside so early in the year, she lost some of her aplomb and said : " Why, gamble, of course."

It was a reminder, slight enough, but there were others that day, that I was in danger of getting out of my depth.

There were no flowers visible in the garden, I noticed, as we walked out after luncheon was over. Instead, on either side of the gravel path that cut through the lawn, box hedges had been planted as borders and in arabesques, with chips of stone strewn over the intervening spaces to throw them into greater relief : one result of the expert efforts that had been made many years before, under the learned direction of Pierre de Nolhac, to restore the two acres of this former royal property to something like their original plan.

Small or not, I found it one of the most agreeable gardens that I had ever seen.

At intervals, evergreen trees and bushes, clipped in the shape of cones and whorls and tall *carafes*, threw their black-green shadows across the famous *tapis vert*. A stone nymph by Clodion, golden-grey and ivy-entwined, laughed with eighteenth-century indifference far above the heads of our twentieth-century procession, individually elegant, may be, but collectively raffish, as we made our way self-importantly through the sunlight towards the Pavillon Bleu beyond the pool. There, I had been warned, backgammon boards awaited us, under the blue-green trellised dome.

Our path lay through a little enclosure surrounded by immensely tall trees à la Fragonard : Lady Mendl's *salle de verdure*. There were two moss-grown stone benches in the shadows ; and for some reason a bronze lectern on a plinth rose in the centre of the leafy room. Ostensibly to study the imitation book, also of bronze, that lay open upon it, but really to avoid the risk of having to admit that my pocket-book contained no more than three five-franc notes, not one of which I could afford to lose to the gimlet-eyed Marquise who marched

at the head of our procession (or to anyone else, for that matter), I detached myself from my companions. To do them justice they did not seem to notice, much less resent, my defection ; and I walked undisturbed to the lectern.

I was surprised to find, engraved on the metal page, the particular poem by Thomas Edward Brown that Henry Crookenden and I had made such fun of at school :

' A garden is a lovesome thing, God wot !
Rose plot,
Fring'd pool,
Fern'd grot—
The veriest school
Of peace ; and yet the fool . . . '

How cynically, at callow fifteen and sixteen, we had parodied the arch, Victorian metre of those lines. But now I suddenly felt, retrospectively, ashamed. There must after all have been a time when one heart, at least, had responded gratefully to their call. How strange, though, to think that it might conceivably have been my hostess's. Her literary taste, I had facilely assumed, was sufficiently indicated by the miniature anthology of silk-stitched inscriptions that I had noticed on the cushions in one of the rooms of the Villa :

' Never Complain. Never Explain.'—

for example, in pale green on white ; and then again, in beige on oyster satin, with its deeper message for one of my nervous, flatulent temperament :

' No, I don't take Soup. Why build
a Meal on a Lake ? '

How could I have been so wrong ?

Years later, seeking an explanation for the presence of this indelible sentimentality in bronze at the very heart of the centre of contemporary sophistication, I read through the two books in which Lady Mendl gives, along with much useful advice, some account of the reconstruction and furnishing of her house and garden at Versailles. I found no mention of the lectern. But throughout the earlier book

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of the two, *The House in Good Taste*, written just before the first world war, there runs a vein of such uninhibited romanticism that I have come to suspect that, for all their use of different mythologies, there was indeed a spiritual bond between the English poet and the American decorator. Brown claims to 'have a sign' that God walks in his garden. Elsie de Wolfe (as Lady Mendl then was) tells how she and her friend, Miss Marbury, 'fall asleep to the tiny piping of the little people' in theirs. 'Certainly,' she writes, 'the fairies play in the enchanted ring of the trees of the *salle de verdure*. We are convinced of that.'

Her book, when it was published, enjoyed a considerable vogue in the United States, running into three editions in as many years. Cruel Time is to blame, not I, if the brief passage which I have quoted only raises a hollow laugh today.

Perhaps also Time, to whose darts she was outwardly so impervious (standing on her head for the good of her figure long after she had reached seventy), had already wrought a deeper change in the original Elsie than was commonly supposed. It was the very romanticism of the young American woman, daring to annex this corner of the delicate French past, and her *flair* for the beauty and life that lay there hidden and faded, which had been responsible for turning her, well before old age, into a public figure, ruling over what almost amounted to a new cult or caste, largely of her own invention, first as a dictator and in the later years, through a more remote control, as something between a mummy and a goddess. It was scarcely her fault if the phenomenon that she had helped to create—the regiment of Amazons to whom the word 'furniture' suggested, instead of something Gothic or Jacobean or Queen Anne, nothing more nor less than the eighteenth-century furniture of France, and for whom 'good taste,' far from having a stuffy, moral connotation, was synonymous with the capacity to recognise, and the money to buy, pictures, furniture and *objets de l'époque*—grew yearly tougher and more hard-bitten. It had still been possible for Miss de Wolfe, in those relatively easy, amateur days of nineteen-thirteen, to indulge a harmless taste for whimsy, and even occasionally to reveal, without much fear of correction, a tendency to inaccuracy in the description of famous buildings combined with an ignorance of elementary French. 'The great trees

back of our domain,' she had written then of the view from her house at Versailles, 'frame the supremely beautiful towers of the Château le Magnificent.' But there were sterner, more professional, days ahead ; and like most successful initiators she must adapt herself if she were to retain her hold on the movement. Needless to say, she met the challenge. So effectively, that by nineteen thirty-seven almost the only outward signs of the insouciant Elsie that still hovered within were the pat of her hand on one's sleeve, and the occasional impish, conspiratorial smile. But the pats, one thought jealously, were sometimes rather indiscriminately accorded (had she no longer *any* taste in people ?) and the smile, even if it was something that she was still happily unable to suppress, was never followed by an explicit acknowledgement of what exactly we were secretly laughing at. But I thought I knew ; as one thinks one can share an intimate joke with an image, half hidden by the faithful in sham jewellery and tinsel and paper flowers.

To her shrine, to be competently advised on a matter of interior decoration, perhaps rather less so on a matter of investment or love, to be told where to buy yet another Louis-Quinze commode or yet another copy of her *Recipes for Successful Dining*, to be, quite simply, 'seen' in such hallowed surroundings, came the still fairly respectful but increasingly knowledgeable pilgrims. They numbered in their ranks a good many women whose European married names had seen better days. But by the mid-thirties the time was past when mere titles impressed. Not so many years before, New England might still have been glad to lend its clear eyes, the Middle West its fair skin, California its incorruptible teeth, to repair the stock of Europe's noblest Houses. But Gotham now held its head as high as Gotha, and to be honest a fraction higher. For though Europe was still essentially 'chic,' an America which knew what was best in Europe and could usually buy it was becoming even more so.

In the process, something surprisingly like a new world aristocracy, based on belief rather than birth, on tastes rather than traditions, was growing up to replace the remains of the old. Given the circumstances of its creation it was understandable that it should still acknowledge a French connexion. When it had time to sit down it did so, even in twentieth-century American hotels, on French eighteenth-

century chairs. And its members, peering into their French eighteenth-century mirrors, even if they might not be satisfied with the cut or texture of their American faces, could always look instead at the reassuring reflexion of their good French clothes. Indeed, the new caste was coming to be recognised just as much by its *couture* as by the style in which it furnished its houses. French clothes had never been more important, not even in the days of the Bourbons. Either you made them, if you had the rare talent ; or you talked and wrote about them, if you had not. And if you could afford to do so, you wore them.

So it was that down the path across the *tapis vert*, along the walks dividing the charming vegetable garden, no longer the daughters of Louis-le-Bien-Aimé ; nor poor Marie-Antoinette whose cottages still mouldered, a little to the south-west, behind the espaliers and raspberry-canés ; not even the pale blue and white figure of much loved Elizabeth Marbury—but Mrs. Gilbert Miller in her latest Mainbocher, Miss Margaret Case of *Vogue* Magazine, God knew who in her new Patou, all very much alive, now practised their paces for a Court ritual of their own.

But it can be misleading, as well as instructive, to look at the past with the eyes of the present. If these ladies were there on the afternoon that I set out to describe, I did not then know their names. Neither had I the knowledge, inadequate and partial as it is even now, to attempt to pin my hostess by the wings like a rare specimen on the setting-board ; still less the leisure to look her up in the book of butterflies and moths and find her exact place among the countless species that make up the order of Lepidoptera. I only knew (or half knew, half guessed) that whatever might be the truth behind her legend, she possessed one quality most becoming to those around whom such legends are woven : a soft heart for the young, even if they were also unimportant.

Matlock Bath

BY JOHN BETJEMAN

From Matlock Bath's half-timbered station
I see the black dissenting spire,
Thin witness of a congregation,
Stone emblem of a Handel choir.
In blest Bethesda's limpid pool
Comes treacleing out of Sunday School.

By cool Siloam's shady rill—
The sounds are sweet as strawberry jam.
I raise mine eyes unto the hill,
The beetling Heights of Abraham ;
The branchy trees are white with rime
In Matlock Bath this winter time.

And from the whiteness, grey uprearing,
Huge cliffs hang sunless ere they fall,
A tossed and stony ocean nearing
The moment to o'erwhelm us all ;
Eternal Father strong to save
How long wilt thou suspend the wave ?

How long before the pleasant acres
Of intersecting Lover's Walks
Are rolled across by limestone breakers,
Whole woodlands snapp'd like cabbage stalks ?
O God our help in Ages past
How long will Speedwell Cavern last ?

John Betjeman

In this dark dale I hear the thunder
Of houses folding with the shocks,
The Grand Pavilion buckling under
The weight of the Romantic Rocks,
And hardest Blue John ash trays seem
To melt away in thermal stream.

Deep in their Nonconformist setting,
Shivering children wait their doom,
The father's whip, the mother's petting,
In many a coffee-coloured room,
And attic bedrooms shriek with fright
For dread of Pilgrims of the Night.

Perhaps it's this that makes me shiver
As I traverse the slippery path
High, high above the sliding river
And terraces of Matlock Bath—
A sense of doom, a dread to see
The Rock of Ages cleft for me.

A Woman of Substance

BY ELSPETH DAVIE

AT the end of a day, Miss Reed, who was fifty-nine and had lived alone over the past few years, would occasionally cry out aloud to strangers, in the course of shopping or waiting for the bus, that she was going home now for a nice, peaceful evening by the fire. The challenge and emotion which she put into these words had a startling effect on certain people who had expected them to be accompanied by a more peaceful expression. By her stares and glaring smiles she seemed waiting to be contradicted or even intercepted on the way home, and people were usually relieved when they saw her well on her way there. Yet, having fired off her challenge, Miss Reed would become as mild and silent again as though she had never even opened her mouth.

The evenings which she spent, however, were not usually so calm, but rather restless and taken up, for the most part, with looking for things which she had missed during the day. She would spend a long time rummaging vaguely about inside her handbag or down the side of her armchair, scooping up pencils and coins which had been lost months before. There was a satisfaction in sifting things before they joined those others which had been missing for years and could be heard jingling about in the lining deep down in the bottom of the chair. Sometimes she simply sat still and searched about in her mind for names or faces or words from the past which she needed again if she was to enjoy some particular memory to the full, in the same way as she rummaged about in the toffee-tin to find the two or three whose special flavour could ensure her the most satisfactory half-hour. Yet it was at these times that she found it difficult to avoid one fact about herself which had an odd taste—odd and sour and unaccountable amongst all the rest—namely, that after spending her youth and middle years in the company of close friends and

Elspeth Davie

relations, she had one day found herself suddenly and absolutely on her own. All the same, she treated any chance remark or question about this as a great indelicacy on the part of the questioner—something she might still prevent by turning her head sharply aside, smiling as at some flippant remark, or simply pretending not to hear at all. In this way she felt she had averted some danger which had come too close, and might in the end threaten her whole existence.

She was, moreover, aware that certain changes which she felt in herself from one week to another would make it difficult for her to give a straightforward account of herself to any other person. There were some mornings, for instance, when her limbs felt so heavy that, as she slowly started to dress, she began to think of herself as a person with a thick body—almost a fat woman. At these times she put nothing on which would restrict her flesh, and she dressed in thick, soft clothes as though making the most of a fatness which had simply not been there the day before and might well disappear tomorrow. Even her hats varied with her sensations of lightness or weight. With the thick clothes she wore a plushy, felt hat and a fat-petalled brown flower lolling across the brim. Under this, the skin of her face looked as soft and mild as dough from which every line had been rolled, and her expression was serene. On the other hand there were times, coming much more frequently and more unwelcome, when she felt herself to be an absolute lightweight, as though she could float in the air as easily as she could walk. It was then a kind of duty for her to leave off the padded comfort of her heavy clothes and get into things more suited to her lightened condition. Everything about her then became unfixed and flighty, from an insubstantial hat of wavy straw and thin, loose-fitting coat, to the pair of open-strapped summer shoes which would not have looked out of place in a dance hall.

On these light days her mind would float vaguely over the events of the day before, settling on nothing for more than a second, or sometimes bringing up some unwanted object from the past which had no relevance to anything else in her present existence. Whatever it was—an advertisement for some out-of-date toothpaste flaking off a brick wall, an oddly designed box of chocolates, or sometimes a whole landscape of houses and figures—it would remain as though suspended in the air before her until she deliberately banished it by

fixing her eyes on something close to her which, by simply stretching out, she could touch with her hand. Her room was full of square-set objects which had rescued her, at some time or another, from these other things.

Miss Reed had come to this town several years ago to live with her widowed sister, and the sister having died within a year of her arrival, she had stayed on in the two large rooms which were left to her. She was high up and could look right along the main road which led down towards the sea at one end, and into the centre of the crowded town at the other. There was a green park opposite, and she liked to feel she could see country, city and seaside simply by drawing back the curtains as far as they would go on either side of her bow windows. Nevertheless, she could never feel that she was anything but a visitor to this town—a holiday guest who had been stranded there by accident and was simply waiting for the chance to get home again. She still walked about the town slowly—a belated sightseer, sometimes puzzled and sometimes pleased by what she saw, but never unconcerned and certainly never at her ease. People would turn to look at her as she strolled about in the evening, endlessly straightening her hat or smoothing her collar and sometimes speaking to herself.

"Well!" she would exclaim loudly, stopping dead to gaze at a monument in the middle of a square, or the view at the end of a narrow lane which she had passed a hundred times before. "I do like that—that's really very good! Yes, I must say I think it's very fine indeed!" And she would smile round at anyone who was standing near as though congratulating him on having a town so interesting to a visitor like herself. Sometimes she would stand for a long time on the edge of the pavement, rummaging in her handbag so that she could listen to two people talking, as she might have stood in a foreign country, waiting to catch familiar words and phrases, and even staring round pointedly when she had at last caught the theme of the conversation. In this way it seemed to her that she had entered into innumerable discussions—about other people's families, their housekeeping and shopkeeping, and the complex deals they made in other cities. It was a story of continual buying, lending and losing, but one which, after all, did not surprise her so much.

She was already familiar with the immense loss and waste which went with every day. Scarcely an hour passed but she read or heard not only of wallets or jewels which were lost, but of people who lost their jobs without warning or whose best friends became enemies overnight ; aeroplanes vanished into thin air over mountain ranges and ships went down at sea. For herself, she had only to put down a parcel and turn her eyes from it for a second—it was gone. If she left her seat in park or café, to get a closer look at something, the place was taken before she could turn round again. Sometimes, in the time it took for her to walk to a litter-basket and back, a complete row of new faces would take the place of the former set on the park bench. Nowadays, when the voices of the pavement ceased she was left with the feeling that under the tide of traffic and pedestrians a heavier, blacker current flowed into which objects and persons could simply sink silently and not be seen again.

It was her fifth year in the city. She had now been so much on her own that if, while she was walking about the town, a stranger should stop to ask her the way, or somebody accidentally wedged against her made a remark on the weather, her response was immediate and ardent as though she were about to make a remarkable, new friend ; and if any man, young or old, made way for her, picked up her glove or offered her his seat in the bus, the flush of surprise would show on her throat a long time afterwards, while, with her gloved hand, she would attempt to hide a smile which was startling and shameless in its pleasure. She had moments of excess when her thanks were repeated over and over again and her confidence given away too lavishly ; there were times when she laughed too suddenly and loud, or stared so avidly that she raised angry looks from the mothers of prim children ; moments when, with her big, flowery head nodding, she leant sideways with a coquettishness which could be terrifying to all but the most hardened. Sensitive people avoided her because she looked too exposed, and as time went on Miss Reed came to rely more and more on the contacts she made with energetic people who had only just time to listen to her for a minute or two, and no time at all to study her and find out what kind of person she really was. In her turn, she began to avoid all those who walked by themselves, talked to themselves or stared at her from a distance

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with sympathetic eyes. These days she preferred to sit down beside those people who showed by the way they gripped the handles of their umbrellas or folded their newspapers when they had finished reading, that they had a good grasp of life—even, perhaps an actual love of it, which could include her without, however, taking much notice of her.

It was all the more important to discover such people on the days when she woke up without her weight, for although it was not always an unpleasant sensation, it meant that she must find a seat in the park more quickly and be very wary of her choice of company. On these days when she went outside, whether she was standing or sitting, she rummaged endlessly in her handbag and in her pockets as though to find there the one heavy thing which would weigh her down—something which, if only she could lay her hands on it, would prevent her from ever again experiencing the panic which came over her when she began to feel that her feet were not properly attached to the ground. When they were not rummaging her hands moved about her person, fastening and unfastening the buttons of her coat or vaguely ruffling round her collar to find some hidden hook. There was always some way of resisting the sensations which made her feel airborne. Occasionally she would stoop quickly and secretly touch the toe of her shoe, tapping it with her nail like a bird testing a shell with its beak, or her fingers, fumbling about her head, would at last discover her hatpin and settle quietly for a long time upon the small, hard bead which seemed to anchor not only her hat to her head, but her whole being to the earth.

Miss Reed did not often make the mistake of going out on windy days. Usually she had some warning of it early in the day and so would stay in her room, keeping her eyes from the tumult of the air outside her window where all sorts of unattached objects might rise suddenly without warning, or float past as though on the crests of waves. On the worst days she had seen not only leaves and feathers, but whole newspapers lifted and twisted high in the air. This autumn afternoon, however, she had no warning of the rising wind until she was well inside the park, and even then it was only a light swirling of the dust beneath the benches and an agitation in the tops of the highest trees—something which might be expected on any afternoon at that

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time of the year. Nevertheless, Miss Reed at once began to look about her for a sheltered seat and more particularly for a person who might provide a bulwark against the disturbance in the air and the rising panic in her own breast. She saw this person at once, recognised her instinctively as a person against whom wind and waves could beat without effect, and made towards her without for a moment taking her eyes off her.

The woman was sitting by herself on a seat under a group of young rowan trees. She had on a stiff, crimson mackintosh and a pointed cap of the same stuff tied under her chin and a pair of wellington boots coming halfway up her legs, so that the effect was of a person encased from head to foot in some metallic substance which crackled and hissed with every movement. She was knitting energetically at a red woollen garment which was crawling slowly down over her knees to the ground and had to be snatched back every few minutes. In spite of this sudden, darting movement as she caught the stuff, the woman gave the impression of immense calm, and each time as she bent forward her eyes took in the entire circle of the park in one sharp, authoritative glance. Now and then a few leaves from the trees behind were shaken over her and slid, unnoticed, down the sleeves of her coat, as though down two cones of polished metal. She took no notice as Miss Reed approached, for her eyes were focused only on the complications of her knitting and on the far distance. What was happening in between seemed to have little interest for her, though occasionally she stared with disapproval at a paper bag which had got stuck on a nearby railing. She was staring at this as Miss Reed sat down and Miss Reed automatically stared too.

But there were worse things to be seen than a paper bag pierced by a railing. The wind was suddenly stronger, and for a few minutes there seemed to be pandemonium in the park. The air was whirling with things which a moment before had been on the solid ground or held tightly in the hands, and from all around came a harsh, ripping sound as of private things being ruthlessly torn apart. Under the trees people were running and spinning with arms lifted to their hats and their uncoiling scarves, and close to Miss Reed's feet a letter went past, newly unfolded and boldly written, so that she could actually make out a word or two before it was lifted up again and

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pressed between the roots of a tree. Nobody followed it, and Miss Reed, who seldom received a letter from one year's end to the next, shuddered at what seemed the worst exposure of all. Out of the corner of her eye she could still see it, white as the palm of an opened hand, and spread out for anyone to read. Now the wind was plucking great wads of paper from the overflowing litter-baskets attached to the bigger trees of the park, and from the cone-shaped mounds of new-mown grass the tops were blown as though they had been green mountains dissolving under some catastrophic storm. Then, as suddenly as it had arisen, the commotion died down. The people who had been running about dropped their arms and went back to their seats again, as at the abrupt ending of music, and now that the whistling and ripping in the trees had stopped it was possible to hear the steady roar of traffic beyond the gates, and louder than ever, close at her ear, Miss Reed heard the swift hissing of the knitter's elbows brushing past her armoured hips and the crackle as she bent and tugged the wool up over her knees. For a moment she rested her hands in her lap and took a good look round her, pursing her lips and sniffing once or twice before she could bring herself to speak.

"It's not much of a park, to my mind," she said to Miss Reed, yet still staring ahead of her. "At any rate, nothing like the sort of park I was used to before I came here. You may have noticed, there are hardly ever any gardeners about, or when they do come it must be just a case of standing about leaning on spades, because you've only to take a good look under the trees—and I don't just mean the ones at the far end, but even there at the main gate—you've only to look, I say, to see an absolute wilderness of weeds. The fact is, the whole place is going to seed and in a few years' time I just wouldn't like to say what it will look like." She took up her knitting again to count the stitches and Miss Reed watched her two sharp finger-ends walking rapidly up the length of the needle.

"Then there's another thing," she went on when she had come to the end of the row. "I'm referring to white flowers. Personally, I'm not a lover of any kind of white flower, but that's neither here nor there. All I'm saying now is—and most people I've spoken to agree with me—white flowers are just not suitable for a public park. Now, if you take any notice of these sort of things at all, you'll have

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seen that they use white here more than any other colour—and at all seasons, mind you. And that's just where I quarrel with them—for, rightly speaking, white *isn't* a colour at all. And people have a right to a *blaze* of colour in a public park!" She spoke the last words fiercely and her cheeks flushed.

"I was very much amused by an article I once saw in a gardening magazine," she went on, grimly smiling into the distance. "It was persuading people to plant white flowers in their gardens, and if I tell you the reason it gave, you'd laugh too. Well, it was partly the smell, but that wasn't the main thing. No, the reason given was that you'd be able to see these same white flowers at night. At night!" She threw back her head in its creaking helmet hat and laughed loudly. "So if you really want to appreciate this park you'd better come and sit here after dark!" Abruptly she bent over her knitting again, and was silent.

Miss Reed had, in recent months, become abnormally receptive to words which were actually addressed to herself. They became immediately impressive in a way which no others, merely overheard, could possibly be. So powerful did they become, indeed, that objects or persons spoken about could change out of all recognition in accordance with another's opinion. Now, as though the change had come about in the lens of her own eye, the focus of the park had altered in a way which made certain parts stand out well to the fore and left the rest blurred. All that was formal and safely limited faded gradually out; all that was clear and solid underwent a subtle change. A certain frailness now showed in the plants and the trees, as though they were not, after all, so well rooted in the ground, or as though a frosty withering had taken place in the last few minutes. Uneasily she noticed it was true that most of the flowers were white, standing separate and delicate all along the dark wall which divided the park from the main road. Even the light had decreased, so that it was not, after all, so difficult to imagine what it would be like to be sitting here in the park at night. The woman in the red mackintosh was speaking again, lifting her elbows wide above the needles which were now moving with a sound like the ticking of a sharp little clock.

"This other park I mentioned—where I used to live—mind you, they worked there! There was one bed shaped like a star, an eight-

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sided star, I remember it was—started at Coronation time and kept up ever since. It fairly blazed from spring right on into the autumn—red and blue at the centre and the tips were white and as sharp as though they'd been cut out with nail-scissors." On the paper pattern which she took from her pocket she now drew a star for Miss Reed to see with the point of her knitting-needle.

" You could see it for miles ! " she exclaimed triumphantly, holding the pattern out at arm's length. " One of my friends had a top flat looking over this park, and from her window you could see the whole thing had been done with a ruler—you'd say there wasn't an eighth of an inch in it one way or another. I believe from an aeroplane it was quite a sight—a sort of landmark, I daresay." She ran the needle under her thumbnail, relaxing enough to sigh ; then remarked briskly :

" I haven't been off the ground myself. What about you ? " Miss Reed, straightening up eagerly to answer this question and at the same time shaking her head, gave the impression that though this was an experience so far from her that she found it difficult to imagine, it was one which, nevertheless, she was sorry to have missed. Yet the truth was—she recognised it with a shudder—being ' off the ground ' was a state which was gradually beginning to have a special meaning for her. What better way to describe the sensations, at once strangely pleasurable, yet nightmarish—of being completely untethered from familiar objects, so that on certain days, before she even put her feet to the ground from the bed, she must first concentrate with her eyes and imagination on the actual weight of her flesh, on the miracle, for instance, that her round, top-heavy head could be supported by her neck for the whole of the day ahead ; or she would force herself to feel the weight of her legs, thick as they were, by laboriously shifting them about under the bedclothes before swinging them heavily, and with a theatrical groan, over the side of the bed. If she did not make these preliminary moves, how easy it was for her now simply to slip out into mid-air and to drift from then onwards for the rest of the day. Now, with an effort, she pulled her thoughts from this and concentrated on the woman beside her who was speaking again, lifting the knitting from her chest where it had been creeping, like a slowly heaving billow of scarlet, down towards her lap.

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"Twelve cousins in this town alone," she was saying. "But that's to say nothing of the American ones, and I'll never lay eyes on them, of course. And when it comes to Christmas, I don't grudge it. It's your own flesh and blood that counts then, and believe me, I'm not referring to Christmas cards or even calendars. There's not a single one of them that hasn't had something in brown paper and string from me regularly these past ten years—and that means keeping a check on the babies. I make my own woolly balls, of course—dozens and dozens of them I've made in my time, and they're not quite so easy as some people might imagine. I don't know what you think, but I've no notion of my friends at all at Christmas time, and mind you, there's a few of *them* too. No, it's flesh and blood that counts, whether you've seen them or not. Flesh and blood—is that the way you look at it too?"

At the mention of flesh and blood Miss Reed's heart began to pound abnormally fast, and she began to wonder if this time she had chosen the wrong person for herself. The atmosphere between them, which should have been comfortably cloudy, thick with friendly indifference, was thinning rapidly. Already the questions and answers were beginning to pierce it. There was something intimate, yet hostile, in the air.

"And who have you?" asked the woman, smoothing the piece of knitting on her knee and stabbing it, row by row, with the point of her needle. But Miss Reed now looked blank, looked even remarkably stupid as though, in the last few seconds, the skin of her face had literally thickened and almost erased the lines and hollows of expression. Only over the nervous pulse of her temple had the skin remained atrociously thin. It was she who now bent over the knitting and studied it for a long time in silence. The woman had laid her needle down on the seat between them and was now sitting quite still and upright, gazing down on Miss Reed's hat where, amongst the brown velvet flowers, she could quite plainly see not only the silver wrapping from a bar of chocolate wound about one of the stalks, but also the printed purple paper which had been expertly fashioned into a flower-head and boldly pinned amongst the others on the front of the brim. For several minutes she stared and stared like an affronted botanist finding an artificial flower amongst some

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choice specimens, until her attention was withdrawn by a movement from Miss Reed who was looking at something in the knitting.

"Yes, there it is!" she was saying, pointing to a small hole a few inches down. "I think I've found what you were looking for!"

The woman in red took up the knitting again. "Now, what exactly are you referring to?" she asked, holding it up formidably high till it quivered like a banner between them and the light. Through the close, scarlet meshes Miss Reed saw the park glow dark and red as a desert where trees and figures stood out black, vibrating dangerously as though before an impending storm. Yet, in spite of her nervousness, she remained stubborn.

"That is where you lost the stitch, isn't it?" she persisted, putting a finger out to point again. At that the other let the knitting fall back into her lap, smiling grimly. She seemed for a time to find some difficulty in bringing herself to speak again, but simply nodded round about her, gathering support from the air. Then she said :

"Do you know this? I suppose I've been knitting garments since I was ten or eleven years old, and I don't believe I've ever, no, never in all that time, dropped, far less actually lost, a stitch. If you'd looked more closely you'd have seen your hole, as you called it, was simply the beginning of the lace pattern. In other words, it's a deliberate hole—and there's another—and there! When it's finished the holes, as you would call them, will link up as an ivy-leaf border." She did not pick up the knitting again, but sat darting glances about her, now sharing her amusement with a nearby holly bush and the two empty seats which were opposite. Miss Reed remained silent.

"Well, who have you?" the woman repeated, more sternly this time. It was Miss Reed's turn to be amused. For some reason, now that she was faced with it, now that there was absolutely no escape from this question, she began to shake with silent laughter—laughter which tore through all the precarious plans she had made to defend herself, like the wind tearing through the ill-kept park. It was only with an enormous effort that she was able to stop herself by doubling up and folding her arms very tightly across her chest. Even then, she could scarcely get the words out between gasps. But, in spite of it all, her companion heard what she said. She showed that she had heard by pursing her lips and nodding slowly several times. The

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answer, at any rate, seemed to have satisfied her, for she asked no more, but only remarked, when she had rolled her knitting up tightly again and put it into her bag, and tied the hood more firmly under her chin :

" Well, I daresay you sometimes feel lonely, living all by yourself. Do you notice those black clouds coming over ? Maybe the forecast's been right for just this once. I'm not waiting to find out, anyway." She nodded to Miss Reed and moved off heavily in the direction of the gates, the holly leaves scraping her mackintosh harshly as she brushed by.

Miss Reed followed the woman with her eyes, very still now, with her face slowly changing and tightening. She was frowning intently over what had just been said to her, like someone slowly translating a remark in a foreign tongue, and now the tightness round her lips gave her a grim, almost a witchlike appearance. She realised with something like hatred for this woman who had just gone, that she was now forced to take up this word ' lonely ' which had been casually given to her, and examine it. It was a word which, if looked at long enough, could be made to describe certain sights and sounds and even smells which were a common part of every day. But, above all, when long-drawn-out and repeated until it had become unfamiliar again, the word was simply an echo of the horns of ships which she sometimes heard very early in the morning or in the middle of a foggy night—sounds melancholy and questioning, which took her past the familiar warehouses of the harbour, past the last rock and the last light, further out than she had ever meant to go, and left her, still floating far out at sea, long after full daylight had come.

It was five o'clock. Around the main gates there was a continual movement of people who had just come into the park after an early tea and those who were leaving to go home to supper. Miss Reed had noticed now, with the beginning of panic, that every person and every object which she had imagined to exist quite separately on its own, was, in reality, attached firmly to something else. Men and women were going past looped together, not only by arms and fingers, but by the looks of affection or of hostility which they turned on one another. Dogs were attached to their owners by leads, and where there were no leads a word could bring them back, as though

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they had felt the familiar tug on their necks. The tired mothers were attached strongly to the earth by the heads of sleeping babies which, as the day wore on, drooped damp and heavy as fruit over their shoulders. Inside the phone-boxes at the gates, people gesticulated and smiled and emerged no longer alone, but joined to one another by endless lines of crossing wires which, in their imagination, filled the whole of the sky over the city. Under the ground it was the same. For if the eye travelled down the trunks of trees, right down to the earth and under it—there the roots were unimaginably long and tough and all entangled with the roots of other trees and plants which, above ground, had seemed to stand at a great distance from one another.

Suddenly, seeing this world vibrating before her eyes with its contacts, its magnificent attachments, Miss Reed felt dizzy and light as a balloon which skiffs the ground and could, at a touch, be sent sailing far above the groups on the ground. She got up and began to walk quickly through the park, not in her usual way skirting the centre, but going carelessly into the thick of it, past low-hanging trees and crowded benches, past prams and barrows, ruthlessly dividing up the close knots of friends and families, parting the couples who had stood too long together, and walking blindly into circles of children whose hard balls rolled against her ankles. Yet from all of them she wanted to receive some harder blow than this—something which would show her, without any doubt, how solid and how sharp they were, so that she would have to push and prod with all her strength to get through them. Only like this could she ever show herself as a woman with weight and bulk enough to be a serious impediment in their way, an interruption to the most intimate talk.

Instead, Miss Reed found that her surroundings were swiftly becoming more elusive than they had ever been before. Things near at hand were wavering as though half-submerged in water. In the distance, the white flowers were all afloat and trees quivered as though rooted at the edge of a stream in flood. She had not interrupted any conversations—the talk flowed round monotonously as it had always done. Behind her the couples had already come together again, and the children, barging past her, scarcely brushed the sleeves of her coat. She stood quite still now and began to look into her

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huge, black handbag, holding it up very close to her eyes and staring down apprehensively, as into the mouth of a cave. When her eyes had searched long enough she raised them and looked far off into the distance, but now her hand explored the dark place and with everything it touched, her eyes, still staring out over the railings, became first excited, then anxious and at last despondent as her fingers scrabbled amongst the familiar, dusty stuff and found nothing of weight. At last she snapped the bag shut, and her hand, climbing uncertainly up over the buttons of her coat, plucked at the brooch of her collar, circled the brim of her hat, and came to rest finally with one finger lightly pressing the hat-pin. But even before she touched it she knew that its special power had gone.

Her hand dropped at once and she began to walk on ; more and more quickly she went until she was right off the path and moving over the grass towards a group of trees. These were not the common ones of the park. Each had a label fixed to the bark at eye level, and circles of iron hoops protected the base of their trunks. Miss Reed, still moving swiftly towards them, gave the impression at first glance, of somebody intent on reading these labels. Her neck was thrust forward as she neared the trees, and she appeared to rise slightly on the tips of her toes to reach the place more quickly.

But now a few onlookers had got to their feet ; some of them were shouting and half a dozen people began to run towards her. Miss Reed's body was tilted forward at a precarious angle. She did not stop when she reached the tree, but tripped on the iron hoops and fell heavily against the trunk with her forehead rammed hard beneath the label. Only for an instant it lay there, but in that time she looked terribly intent, like someone with an ear pressed against a telegraph pole, listening to the murmuring inside. When her head fell back her hands still stroked lightly down the trunk as though loath to let go of it.

The crowd around her was now huge, and although she was lying on her back staring mainly at the sky, she was aware of everything that went on. Yet there was not a part of her body that she could move. From her head right down to her feet, which unaccountably had been removed from her shoes, she was as hard and heavy as iron ; and with every breath she could feel herself pressed more and more

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heavily down into the ground. She had the feeling, too, that now everybody wanted to touch her and to look at her. Those in front were angrily holding back the children on the fringe of the circle who were scrambling to push in. They stood around her, swaying heavily to and fro from the pressure behind, and Miss Reed could feel the thumping of the grass under her body and the air about her quick and warm with the breath of excited people.

There was another sound which she heard only when she was free of the thudding ground and swinging in mid-air. For two men had now hoisted her up and were carrying her towards the nearest bench. But the sounds they made were extraordinary—out of all proportion to what they were doing and the distance they were going. Incredulously Miss Reed heard the panting and the groaning and the laborious sighs which made a noise like the roaring wind, close to her ears—and she shut her eyes triumphantly to hear it better. She had made no mistake this time in feeling a change in herself. These men had drawn her up out of the ground only with the greatest difficulty, as though she had been rooted there, and now they were grunting and staggering under their load. When they had laid her on the bench she opened her eyes and saw faces, purple with exertion, turning away from her.

"Unconscious," murmured one, wiping the back of his neck with a handkerchief. "It makes them a dead weight to handle."

Meanwhile Miss Reed grew more and more conscious of everything around her, but, above all, she could not take her eyes from the park official who had pushed his way through the group and was now standing beside her, holding her open handbag in his hand. She watched him intently as he felt inside, and in spite of the painful weight of her head, she raised it for a moment off the bench to see him better. For now it seemed to her that on this familiar movement of his searching hand, all her chances of survival as a flesh and blood creature would depend, and with growing panic in her eyes she studied his face for the first sign of disappointment. But he had not rummaged or fumbled. He seemed satisfied with what he had found there, and he read her name out aloud from an old envelope he held in his hand. In his official voice, trained over the years to reach the wild boys whacking at bushes in the distance, he announced

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her to the whole park, so that even people passing a long way from the group heard and turned to look. Those around Miss Reed no longer pushed, but stood back a little, murmuring her name like guests who had just been introduced. But to Miss Reed, who had put her head back again and now lay absolutely still, the mixture of pain and pleasure which she felt was so overwhelming that it was as though she had been renamed, in the last few minutes, before some solemn assembly. Her eyes were shut again, but the official who had noticed the look in them earlier said :

" You'll be all right now, lady. Nothing to worry about at all. Here they're coming in at last ! "

The three men in white coats had wrapped her up tightly, and before the crowd could move in again she was on the stretcher and moving swiftly between the earth and the sky towards the gates. This time, however, the sensation was not one of floating, and there came suddenly into her mind a phrase which years ago had been applied to her, but which, amongst the floating, rocking conditions of her present life, had never been heard again nor been remembered by her—not even on those days when she could actually feel the weight of her own body. She remembered it now—and from their faces, careful and severe, she knew that these trained men had it in mind also, that they realised who they were carrying—a person who was to be handled with the greatest possible care and skill, somebody of formidable weight to be reckoned with—in short, an unwieldy, cumbersome, woman of substance.

Voices of the Dawn

Korean Poems translated by

PETER HYUN

THE most noticeable thing about Korean poetry as a whole is the proximity of the poet to nature. In our Alpine land of snow mountains, green meadows and crystal clear streams, the Korean poet has drawn his inspiration from the rise and fall of the sun and moon. The wind of his fate, no matter how hard, has never shaken his faith in nature, which, according to our time-honoured philosophy of life and death, is the path to heaven, infinity, serenity and happiness. And the people have sought expression in poetry when they looked at the spring blossoms ; when they listened to the sound of falling leaves in autumn ; or when, having been dearly loved, they were rejected. These have always been among the main themes of Korean poetry.

It can be said that Korean poetry of the past was more flexible in structure than the strict rhythmic patterns of China and the short forms (e.g. the Tanka and Haiku) of Japan. One of the reasons why our ancient poetry was mellower and softer in structure than Chinese or Japanese verse is a climatic one. Where continental China must content herself with the rigours of the wind which sweeps continuously down from Siberia ; and Japan, as a Pacific island, is at the mercy of earthquakes and typhoons, Korea has the frosty winter and warm summer which enables a poet to feel at ease in his surroundings. The subject matter, always based upon the poet's love of nature, was common to all of the Far East. Only in the twentieth century has the poetry of the Far East in general been influenced both culturally and politically by the impact of the West upon us.

Peter Hyun

YI KYU-BO

1168-1241

The world of Yi Kyu-bo was a perfect combination of the real and the unreal. His early poverty and physical deprivations meant nothing to him. He studied hard, passed the difficult Kwago, or Government Examination, and eventually became a poet laureate.

The cock crows above the thatched river hut.
The moon turns pale ; the dawn draws near.
The black ripples pass by, one by one,
Like the shadows of the Moon's white bridge.
The eastern breeze sways the drooping willows.
Embracing the white moonbeams,
The midnight fishers returning home
Are like white flowers ;
Their distant song comes nearer and nearer.
Are they fishers ? Are they ghosts ?

SONG SUN

1493-1583

Song Sun was a personal counsellor to King Chungjong (1506-1545). Later in life he returned to his native village of Damyang and led a pastoral life.

Having spent ten years
In building a grass hut,
The clear breeze occupies one half
And the bright moon the other.
The earth too is full of breeze and moon,
So why not stay out-of-doors ?

Korean Poems

SONG IN

1517-1564

Song In married Princess Chungsun and led a happy epicurean life. His intellectual friends included many eminent Taoist-Confucian scholars of the period.

Forget what you see,
Ignore what you hear.
Thus I live day and night,
Never meddle with others.
My hands alone work well;
They know how to exchange cups.

YI WON-IK

1547-1643

Yi Won-ik was political adviser to King Kwanghaeju (r. 1609-1623).

Were the willow to have ten thousand strings,
Could they tie up the spring breeze ?
Were the butterflies and bees to seek honey,
Could they stop the falling blossoms ?
However firm our ties may be,
What becomes of them if she leaves me behind ?

KIM KI-RIM

1909-

Kim Ki-rim is a pioneer of the avant-garde movement in Korean poetry and with the recent publication of his collected poems he by-passed the prevailing interests—neo-romanticism, neo-realism or symbolism—and declared that poetry should serve as the prophet of a new world, of a new history.

The white butterfly had no fear of the sea,
For she was not told of its deep, deep depth.

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Mistaking the sea for a green green field,
She soaked her wings over the waves
And shivered like a poor little queen.
In the month of purple-blue violets
There was no fragrance of flowers on the sea ;
But dyed in pale blue was the new moon
On the shoulders of the butterfly.

MOH YUN-SUK

1910—

Moh Yun-suk is probably the greatest living poetess in Korea today. She is noted for her mastery over sentimentalism and romanticism.

Youth flows away bringing the dusk to its smile.
Life, exiled from its dream, is a dismal journey.
But my soul shall not grow old, nor flow away.
It will remain forever young in my blue bower.

Youth is the idle angler
Whose tackle is hidden in biting darkness ;
As he walks home without a catch
He will hear the nocturnes of dead souls.

Youth—what is youth ? Life—what is life ?
What is love ? What the dream ?
In the feeble hands of a frail old man
The watermill turns mocking the time.

The once beauteous flock of clouds grows ugly,
Soon to be dispersed in the playful storm.
The once glorious golden beauty of heaven
Turns to the colour of the dark soil.

Time turns to dusk ; gulls sweep by the sea of life.
Life is but sorrow ; youth is but the cloud that shines at dawn.

Korean Poems

O blue sky hidden behind the clouds,
You never change, you never die !

Forsaking the deceitful shine of youth
I do not laugh at the dream that vanishes.
In my soul's bright harbour, the grove of my life,
In the sky far above, unchanging is my blue bower.

CHO BYUNG-HWA

1920-

Cho Byung-hwa, a brilliant scientist, teaches contemporary literature at Chungan University in Seoul. This poem was written in 1956.

Squeezed between city and civilisation,
We are a shattered people
That seek happiness
Bit by bit.

I ask my heart
To put out its fire,
I spend many a night,
Hollow and vigilant.

Waiting does not tire me ;
A promise is too precious to miss.

When the fallen leaves glow
In the bright Autumn sun
We tell our old tales
On a street corner.
In the boiling hot summer
We endure good humouredly
The long painful days.

Let us build a dyke
Against the rising flood

Peter Hyun

Of city and civilisation.
Let us meet by the water,
Where the twinkling stars nestle.
And seek happiness
Bit by bit.
By warming our hearts
Before the flood overflows us.
O a shattered people !
With eyes clear as the distant Autumn lake !

The Poplars

BY INEZ HOLDEN

L LOUISE thought that the place she had left might still be visible from the window of the train.

The Poplars was a white house standing on a hill. The first time Louise had gazed up at it from the village she had been surprised to see the long line of tall trees, planted at a respectful distance from the kitchen garden, because until then she had supposed they had only chosen the name to conceal the true nature of the little estate.

The woman in the corner seat asked Louise if she was looking for something, "Some landmark perhaps?"

"Oh, only a house I used to know." The train had been travelling very fast, there was no sign of The Poplars now. "It must have been pulled down," she said, in panic, to ward off any further questions.

"There's been a lot of demolishing in these parts," the woman remarked.

"Nothing compared with what they're doing up in London," the man sitting opposite said. "Whole streets they're pulling down up there. There's no symmetry left."

Louise returned to her place by the sliding door. They might as well be talking about me, she thought. Certainly I am demolished, and there is no symmetry in me any more. She picked up her book, but the print seemed to sway with the movement of the train. She touched the words with her forefinger, trying to bring meaning to the page, as a life-guard might attempt to bring colour back to the cheeks of an unknown saved from the sea.

Then she remembered the little box of blue capsules. "Take one any time you feel 'jittery,'" Sister had said. "Twenty-five should see you through," and then Sister had laughed because no one would expect to feel 'jittery' twenty-five times in one short week-end in

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London. Well, the moment had come to take the first. Louise went out into the corridor, but when she opened the box there were only five capsules. "These memory lapses are always distressing." Louise tried to smile to keep her spirits up. I suppose I got it wrong and Sister only said five, but then why should she have laughed? Anyhow, it's fortunate that I'm not like my room-mate, Helena, who can't swallow anything without a glass of water to wash it down, or my other room-mate, Maureen, who has a puritanical horror of taking any medicine at all. That's very unusual in these days of stimulants and tranquillisers or 'Up pills' and 'Down pills' as we call them at The Poplars. How strange the telegraph poles look tied together and pulling each other backwards at break-neck speed, and the wide fields skimming along with them, but of course I know that both are stationary and it is we who are moving, to think otherwise would be an illusion, but, at least not a delusion—how fond Doctor Linkenhof is of explaining the difference when he comes over to see me from the Big House. Ah, the Big House with its open gates and closed wards, it has no proper name and we are never told what goes on there—dreadful things, no doubt—but Doctor Linkenhof, himself, seems so safe and calm behind his glasses, though I suspect the thick lenses are more to prevent anyone seeing into his thoughts than to enable him to see out any better. "Any extra strain or excitement and you are still liable to forget things, or to get the sequence of events slightly out of focus," that was what Doctor Linkenhof said in his veiled voice—accented but controlled. "Do not worry, your memory is not impaired, it is functional and not organic, so it will pass."

Louise returned to the compartment. There was little strain or excitement in life at The Poplars, but going to stay with her sister and brother-in-law was something of an adventure. 'Jim and I are so much looking forward to your being here with us for two whole days,' Paula had written. They had wanted to come to the station to meet her but Louise had written back to say that she would rather find her own way. Besides, she had a secret reason. The shop, not far from Paddington, where she hoped to buy a present for Timmie.

With new-found confidence she turned to the woman sitting next

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to her. "What do you think would be the most suitable present for a six-year-old boy?"

"Depends what his tastes are, don't it," the woman answered. "Can your son read?"

"Oh, Timmie's not my son. He's my sister's little boy. Yes, he's always reading." Louise had not seen Timmie for two years but she often imagined him now sitting by the fire looking at a large book on his lap.

"Well, then I expect he'll have plenty of books already. What about something to do with railways, such as an engine?"

"A toy engine," Louise said, delighted. "It's just what I thought of getting for him."

"They don't change much," the man said. "My boy's just at the stage when he wants to be an engine driver," he laughed. "And worse still he informs me that I wish him to be an engine driver."

"What do you wish him to be?" Louise asked.

"A chartered accountant."

"A chartered accountant." Louise began to laugh but when she saw that no one else was even smiling, she stopped abruptly. Perhaps the father is a chartered accountant himself. How ill-mannered he must think me. She tried to explain. "You see, I imagined your little boy as a chartered accountant *already*—I mean still in short pants but going up to London each morning by the eight-twenty train carrying a brief-case and wearing a bowler hat—and the little boy strap-hanging as he reads his newspaper. Somehow it seemed so funny," and she began laughing again. But she saw that she had only made matters worse. They stare at me so coldly now, she thought. The friendly atmosphere has gone. What a pity when they were all beginning to accept me. She stared straight ahead in silence.

Above each numbered place in the compartment there was a framed photograph of some 'Beauty Spot in the British Isles.' Louise gazed at the tinted picture of cows drinking at the lake's edge in a meadow. In the background there was a windmill.

It appears peaceful enough at first sight, she thought. But what about the windmill. Perhaps it has been converted and is now inhabited like the one Douglas and I lived in through that long last

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summer. The couple in that windmill are quarrelling. He is a painter, like Douglas. She stared more intently at the photograph. At this moment the man's wife, who looks like me, is washing some dishes in the sink, and boiling some more water on a paraffin stove, so that later she can wash and iron the clothes too. She is acting out the old comedy of pretending there is nothing seriously wrong, while the man stares morosely out of the mean, rounded windows waiting for the time when he can set off for the pub down the hill.

The train roared into a tunnel. When it emerged into the sunlight, Louise thought, Yes, Douglas has come out of the windmill now, he is lost to sight already. It won't take him long to get there but he will come back slowly. He may fall into a ditch and sleep for a bit and then he'll get up and struggle on home again but whatever time he gets back there'll be the same scene of combined horror and high comedy, Louise sighed deeply. Yes, indeed, to be subjected to Alcoholic's aggression and Boozer's gloom in turn, that is enough to send anyone crazy in the end, but what about the Boozer himself? He walks in tumult like the storm but still he goes scot-free in a sympathetic world. "The poor fellow's wife, you know, well, she's not quite normal, goes round the bend from time to time, but really right off her rocker." "Rock-a-billy, rock, rock, rock." They would be doing rock and roll in the recreation room at The Poplars now with someone singing "Rock and Roll is good for the Soul"—but of course that meant good for your state of mind, and fine for working off your aggression. "What are you doing about your aggression?" that's what all the psycho-boys asked now with their worldly wise smiles, because mis-directed aggression might lead to murder, but if there was no scope for murder because the intended victim was stronger of arm, or fleet of foot, then the aggression would come boomeranging back on yourself. "And hence we have suicide." Dr. Linkenhof's very words. But was he right in supposing that suicide was only the other side of the killer coin—"Throw the abstraction high up in the air—Heads for murder or Tails you call suicide," no, surely suicide could be a close relation, the sister of despair, the cousin of confusion or even the child of that fearsome couple strain.

The Poplars

"Aggression is only the way an individual attacks the situations he encounters in the outside world," but for all Doctor Linkenhof's soft explanations, the word Aggression still had a brutish sound. And what about Douglas in the windmill?—his aggression seemed to feed upon itself, and grow stronger with every meal.

Then there was Maureen's father who used to line up his daughters outside his house each morning and make them number from the right—"One . . . Two . . . Three . . . Four—"—as though they were raw recruits conscripted for Service—before giving them fatigue duties for the day. Yet this man remained as safe as if he had been born in his shirt—a popular man in his local pub, generous with the drinks, but not over-doing it seeing as he had home obligations—left the Army as a sergeant major, without a stain on his character, and he's been father and mother to those girls of his, yet two of them haven't turned out well. They say the second's not quite the ticket. Takes after her mother no doubt, though she's been gone this long while.

Whenever Maureen had one of her screaming fits she would shout over and over again: "Give me an axe to kill me Dad," sometimes she would sing it in a sort of jingle. "Give me a nice new chopper, so's I can finish him off good and proper." But although she spoke of the sergeant-major as "me Dad," she had long since ceased to think of him as such. "Doctor Linkenhof is not my father in Heaven," she said, "but he's my father in The Haven," which was the name of the new quarters which had been built for him between the Big House and The Poplars.

Helena, the other room mate, had escaped from Europe quite a long time ago. She had managed all right as an assistant in a tobacconist's shop, but now she had developed a terrible stammer. Doctor Linkenhof believed that he could cure her, but did he know that when she talked in her sleep she did not stammer at all as she called out in a loud clear voice, several times in succession, "No more deportations."

Before leaving The Poplars Louise had gone down to the village post-office which was in Olive's cottage. The top windows were

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usually blinkered with grey sun-blinds—a face with closed eyelids. Olive had never had any 'nervous trouble' but for all that, she had a number of cranky notions such as too much sun would burn you up in the end or too many hot baths would wash you away. Yet everyone liked Olive and when Louise had drawn out five pounds from her Post Office Savings Account, Olive had said: "Enjoy your week-end in London, dear, and don't forget to come down to the village to tell me all about it when you get back."

Louise opened her hand-bag and looked into her purse. There was only one pound note and some silver. How had this happened? Perhaps she had only cashed two pounds after all? There was the return ticket but Sister had bought that for her when she had seen her off at the station.

Louise had left her Post Office Savings Book in her room at The Poplars so she could not check on the amount now. But would she have enough money to buy Timmie's present? She began clasping and un-clasping her hands, a habit she had when the world of reality seemed out of her reach. Afraid that she might draw attention to herself, she pretended to be searching for her lipstick in her bag.

The train rushed into a second tunnel. Louise welcomed the darkness but soon she was thinking, I need not have worried about the other people in the compartment, they are much too busy quarreling with each other to trouble about me. The man was complaining that the woman opposite had trodden on his foot.

"Then keep your big feet out of the way," she answered.

It was easy enough to tell who was speaking by the sound of their voices.

"Swine, all of you," the second woman shouted. "You think of nothing but yourselves."

The train came out on the other side of the tunnel. If only they would stop calling each other names, Louise thought. If they get to blows I suppose I shall have to stop the train by pulling the communication cord before they kill each other.

Louise, dazzled by the daylight after the darkness of the tunnel blinked her eyes several times, then she looked quickly from one face to the other. She put her hands up to her mouth as if to swallow back the angry words; although she could still hear the hatred in

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their voices she saw now that the expressions on all their faces were serene and their lips were not moving.

"What's the matter, dear?" This time Louise saw the woman's lips were moving in time to her gentle voice.

"Oh, I don't feel well," Louise said.

The man stood up, "It's all right. We're there now," he said. "I'll help you down with your things." As the train stopped he reached up to the rack for her week-end case. It was really only an enlarged shopping bag which she had made herself in the Occupational Therapy Class, but it had enough room for the few things she would need in London.

Her travelling companions watched from the window and waved to her. Kind of them, she thought, to see that I am all right before getting out of the train themselves.

She walked towards the barrier.

The sun was shining and as she looked up she saw, as in a mirage, Olive's blinkered cottage and beyond it the white house on the hill. Holding her shopping bag closely to her side she could feel the outlines of a toy engine. The toy engine she had bought in the shop near Paddington. . . . She remembered now that they had sent Timmie away for her visit. She handed her half ticket to the man waiting by the barrier. I suppose they thought I should frighten Timmie and that is why they sent him away. But aloud she said "I hope that is the right half?"

The man nodded as he took it.

"It's a return ticket," Louise told him.

"That's right," the Ticket Collector said, "you have returned."

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